Stoic Compatibilism: Uncovering Moral Responsibility in a Deterministic World

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Abstract: This paper addresses a puzzle in Stoicism. While the school emphasizes virtue, control, and responsibility, it also maintains that all events are "fated" or "determined." This apparent incongruency in Stoicism has led to an ongoing scholarly debate about the tenability of Stoic compatibilism. In this paper, I insert myself into this debate. I do so by analyzing Stoic compatibilism through the lens of Frankfurtian compatibilism, asserting that even without the possibility to act otherwise, the Stoic understanding of freedom creates rational grounds for moral responsibility. I contend that even though the Stoics believe that our actions are causally determined, their understanding of rational assent allows actions to be attributable to agents. I suggest that this was the primary concern for the Stoics and that forcing contemporary understandings of free will upon ancient discussions of moral responsibility is an anachronistic retrojection that impairs our ability to understand ancient thought.

Introduction

Stoicism is one of the most practiced, yet most seemingly paradoxical philosophies. On the one hand, it professes to offer practitioners control over their lives. By discerning what is inside of their control from what is outside of it, followers of Stoicism are afforded a better sense of where to direct their energy. On the other hand, Stoics argue that the world follows a causal order, often referred to as causal determinism. This chain of causality is driven by universal reason, or *logos,* and it is, at all times, unbroken. This raises an important question: How can individuals truly be responsible for their actions, and thus assume control over their lives, if every choice they make is part of an unbroken causal chain?

This dilemma connects to the broader philosophical concept known as compatibilism, which allows for moral responsibility in a determined world.

Compatibilists believe that "freedom is nothing more than an agent's ability to do what she wishes in the absence of impediments that would otherwise stand in her way."[1] In this way, Stoics contend that moral responsibility is compatible with a determined world because freedom does not require choices to occur spontaneously, that is, without an uncaused source.

However, the validity of compatibilism has been a matter of contention for thousands of years, and the inherent tension between moral responsibility and causal determinism has remained an important question in discussions of Stoicism. Even today, scholars engage in a lively debate regarding Stoic compatibilism.[2]

In this paper, I insert myself into this debate. I argue that Stoic compatibilism is tenable because it creates grounds for moral responsibility in a deterministic world by showing that people's actions are a consequence of their internal states regardless of whether they possess the ability to act otherwise.

I do this by first examining causal determinism and establishing an understanding of Stoic psychology (i.e., how actions are attributable to individuals). Then, I argue that Stoic compatibilism fits within Frankfurt's framework of compatibilism and creates reasonable grounds for moral responsibility in a deterministic universe.

Causal Determinism in Stoicism

Determinism has been an important facet of Stoicism since its inception, though the term itself does not appear in antiquity.[3] It is, most simply, the idea that all events, including human actions, are caused by preceding events and preexisting states. Famously, Chryssipus laid out the inchoate base for Stoic determinism as he argued that nothing can move without a cause.[4] Intuitively, we understand that if something is moving, then some other thing must have caused that object to begin moving. Using this same logic, Chryssipus argued that believing that our actions come about spontaneously would be the same as believing that objects could be the source of their own movement. In turn, he posited that every event, including every human action, comes about as a result of antecedent causes.

The Stoics believe that each set of antecedent causes may lead to only one future. Naturally, the unpredictability of the universe seems contrary to this sentiment. Not only do different people respond to the same stimuli in different ways, but the same person may also respond differently at various points in their lives. However, the Stoics believe that the human capacity for rationalism, or what drives the decisions they make,

1 Michael McKenna and D. Justin Coates, "Compatibilism," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Spring 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/.

2 Dorothea Frede, "Stoic Determinism," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics,* ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 179.

3 Frede, "Stoic Determinism," 180.

4 Suzanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 38.

is fundamentally a part of the causal chain. In other words, despite possessing the ability to rationally contemplate actions, human actions are as causally determined as every other part of reality. The Stoics believe that when humans act, they could not act in any other way than they do.[5]

Historically and contemporarily, the conclusion that all actions are predetermined or fated seems to imply that people cannot be held morally responsible for their actions. If someone could not have acted differently than they did, how can we blame them for their action? The Stoics hold that despite their deterministic worldview, moral responsibility remains possible. They argue that while human rationality is part of the causal chain, actions still stem from their actor, rather than from an external cause. The idea that human choices are attributable to us as agents, rather than to external causes, forms the backbone of Stoic compatibilism and creates rational grounds for responsibility despite humans lacking the capacity to act differently than they do.

Nature and That Which Depends on Us

Contemporary applications of ancient Stoicism place a major emphasis on a "dichotomy of control," or an understanding that some parts of the world are beyond human control while others are within it. While not explicitly an aspect of Stoicism, the dichotomy of control most closely relates to the notion of "that which depends on us."

Determinists and non-determinists alike recognize that many aspects of the world are often determined by causes beyond human control: the weather, genetics, the inevitability of death. The Stoics believe that these aspects of the world do not depend on us; however, they do form an important facet of Nature. The idea of Nature is perhaps the most important aspect of Stoicism. It encompasses all things and is driven by *Logos*, or the guiding principle of universal reason. Indeed, the key goal of Stoicism is famously imagined as aligning oneself with Nature.[6] But how can humans aim to align themselves with Nature if they themselves are part of it? And how does this contribute to an understanding of Stoic compatibilism?

The answer to both questions is found in the Stoic understanding of fate. A comprehensive understanding of the term requires far more time, space, and analysis than this paper can offer, but for the discussion at hand, only a basic understanding is necessary. Importantly, fate is both eternal and active. While fate is teleological in the sense that all events follow its order, it is also active in the sense that living, rational beings participate in its creation. Like actors in a play following a pre-written speech, our active participation in fate creates reality.

It is this understanding that defines how humans can and should live in accordance with Nature: "Connected with the eternal predetermination of all motions and states is the point that it is pointless to make attempts to influence or change one's fate, since at any time all future occurrents have been determined already, and are unchangeable."[7] Living

5 Tad Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, ed. Brad Inwood (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 265.

6 Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (Penguin Books, 1969), 37.

7 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 49.

in accordance with Nature, then, is living without resistance to fate. It is recognizing that all things are as they should and will be.

Returning to the idea of that which depends on us, we can connect this understanding of fate to Stoic compatibilism. Chrysippus laid out that something depends on us if we are causally responsible for it occurring or not occurring.[8] While something may have been fated to happen, it still depended on us in the sense that we were an active agent in bringing it about (e.g., A cup of coffee may have been fated to spill, but it depended on us in the sense that we dropped it).

Hundreds of years after Chryssipus, Epictetus revisits the idea of that which depends on us, and he approaches the idea in a different light than earlier Stoics. Namely, he focuses on the sorts of things that depend on us and those that do not. He begins *The Enchiridion* by stating,

> Some things are in our control and others not. Things in our control are opinion, pursuit, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever are our own actions. Things not in our control are body, property, reputation, command, and, in one word, whatever are not our own actions. The things in our control are by nature free, unrestrained, unhindered; but those not in our control are weak, slavish, restrained, belonging to others.[9]

For our discussion of Stoic compatibilism, the most important part of this quote is the use of the word "free." Epictetus was the first Stoic to connect what depends on us with the Greek word for freedom, *ελευθερία*.[10] Today, we are said to be free when we possess the ability to make a choice–that is, we are free when we possess the ability to act in two different ways. As discussed, the Stoics fundamentally did not believe that we possessed this ability.

As such, we must consider the historical and linguistic context in which Epictetus uses the word free. Instead of using free in a personal sense, the Greeks used it in a political sense to mean free from tyranny. For Epictetus, acting freely meant acting unconstrained by external forces, not acting outside of causal determinism.[11]

The contrast between negative and positive freedom (or liberty) captures this difference. One source describes this difference, writing, "Negative liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. One has negative liberty to the extent that actions are available to one in this negative sense. Positive liberty is the possibility of acting—or the fact of acting—in such a way as to take control of one's life and realize one's fundamental purposes."[12] Given the Stoic (and especially Epictetus's) emphasis on recognizing what is outside of our control, negative freedom more aptly fits into the Stoic imagination.

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8 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 331.

9 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter, 135 C.E., https://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html.

10 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 331.

11 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 340.

12 Ian Carter, "Positive and Negative Liberty," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Spring 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/.

Finally, that which depends on us is an important concept because it plays a crucial role in the Stoic understanding of moral responsibility. The things that are directly in our control—meaning those things that occur unconstrained by external physical forces—are subject to internal, rather than external causes. In his earlier quote, Epictetus laid the groundwork for an understanding of those things which are directly attributable to us as agents, which is fundamental to understanding the things for which we can be held morally responsible. However, without an understanding of Stoic psychology, it would still seem as though even those actions which depend on us would be attributable to external, rather than internal, causes since we were fated to act as we did. To understand why the Stoics believe our actions are our own, we must understand the role of assent in Stoic psychology.

Impressions and Assents

The Stoics spent a considerable amount of time explaining the dynamics of internal causes. This is often referred to as the psychological branch of Stoicism; however, given the metaphysical nature of this branch, discussions are hardly beyond the philosophical realm. Impressions and assents are the main features of Stoic psychology.

Impressions refer to "a certain alteration or change in the mind."[13] This is a broad definition because impressions refer to a broad category. They may be sights we witness, events we experience, ideas we conjure, or any other thing which calls for a response from us.[14] Importantly, impressions are thought to be outside of us; they do not depend on us. It is only through our assents that impressions lead to action.

Most simply, an assent is the acceptance of a particular impression that takes place between the reception of a stimulus and our response.[15] It is the moment we can consider how we should act, or whether the impression we receive is a true one. An example can be helpful here. Imagine you are driving down the freeway, and someone cuts you off. The impression that you receive here is that you have been cut off. This may bear with it the proposition that you should, in response, get angry. If you do get angry, the Stoics would say that this was not a result of the impression you received, but rather because of the assent to the impression. If you were a patient person, the proposition that you should get angry would have been one to which you would have withheld assent, that is one you would not have acted upon.

There are two implications of this discussion of assents with respect to moral responsibility and freedom. First, Stoics do not believe that events determine our actions; rather, our assents determine our actions. Marcus Aurelius writes in *Meditations*, "Take away thy opinion, and then there is taken away the complaint, 'I have been harmed.' Take

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13 Tad Brennan, *The Stoic Life: Emotions, Duties, and Fate* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 53.

14 There is some disagreement about whether impressions are best understood to be external or internal (e.g., Brennan, *The Stoic Life*, 54). In this paper, I treat impressions as outside of oneself, even if it happens to be a thought that crosses the mind. In other words, impressions are not in the realm of things that depend on us.

15 Brennan, *The Stoic Life,* 52.

away the complaint, 'I have been harmed,' and the harm is taken away."[16] Here, Aurelius shows that events themselves do not carry value; rather, their value is something we add. This is to say that our assents are in our control, but impressions are not. This allows the Stoics to attribute actions to individuals rather than external events.

Second, the Stoic belief in freedom comes directly from our capacity for assent. One source describes assents as "the source of human freedom . . . something non-human animals do not have."[17] If we did not have the ability to assent or withhold assent, then there would be no way to understand our actions beyond the events that caused them. Indeed, Stoic compatibilism would become indefensible without our capacity for assent because events would fundamentally determine our actions. However, the capacity for assent allows our actions to be determined by us, rather than external events, since we can withhold assent from an impression. With this understanding of Stoic psychology, let us consider how Stoicism fits within the compatibilist framework of Frankfurt and how this creates rational grounds for moral responsibility.

Frankfurtian Compatibilism and Stoicism

As a reminder, compatibilism is the idea that humans still possess free will in a determined world.[18] To preface this discussion, debates of free will often concern definitional problems. This is to say that how we define free will is an important aspect of discussion. The more contemporary understanding of free will emerged around 500 CE, around the time of the emergence of Christian philosophy.[19] This notion of free will is one in which individuals possess the capacity, at any time, to act or not act in a certain way, regardless of their past or their beliefs (within the bounds of environmental constraints). To many, this is the prerequisite for our actions to be described as free: we could have acted differently than we did.

It would be notably anachronistic to attribute this notion of free will to discussions of the Stoics. Ancient discussions of free will do not have any interest in understanding if the same person with the same beliefs and desires in the same circumstances could possess the ability to do or not do a certain action.[20] Rather, the Stoics were concerned with the question of whether an agent, rather than "something else," was responsible for an action. Still, some contend that for an agent to be responsible for an action that they

16 Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, trans. George Long, 167 C.E., https://classics.mit.edu/Antoninus/meditations.html, book four.

17 Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," 52.

18 McKenna and Coates, "Compatibilism."

19 Timothy O'Connor and Christopher Franklin, "Free Will," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Winter 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/.

20 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* as cited in Tad Brennan, "Fate and Free Will in Stoicism: A Discussion of Susanne Bobzien, Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by David Sedley, Volume XXI (Oxford University Press, 2001), 264.

must have possessed the ability to act differently than they did; however, compatibilists reject this notion, arguing that individuals can still be said to have acted freely even if they were determined to act as they did.

In *Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibilities*, Harry Frankfurt defends this compatibilist understanding of moral responsibility. His discussion is highly applicable to the Stoic's understanding of compatibilism, and his framework can demonstrate how Stoic compatibilism is defensible. Frankfurt's work directly engages with the question of whether individuals must possess the ability to act differently than they did to be morally responsible for an action. He describes this as the principle of alternate possibilities, which he defined as an understanding of moral responsibility wherein "a person is morally responsible for what he has done only if he could have done otherwise."[21]

Frankfurt argues against the validity of this principle by asserting that there are cases where an individual may be guaranteed to do something without being compelled to do that thing. This means that they could not have acted otherwise, but they still acted freely. These are now known as "Frankfurt cases." One such example follows.

A man, Tim, goes to vote in a presidential election. He could vote for President A or President B; however, the government has covertly implanted a device into Tim's brain, such that if he tries to vote for President B, he will be compelled to vote for President A. However, Tim has no intention whatsoever to vote for President B. As he walks into the voting booth, he confidently checks the box next to President A and leaves. Is Tim morally responsible for his vote?[22]

While Tim certainly acted as he wished, he could not have acted otherwise. This points out a flaw in the principle of alternate possibilities. Despite acting without compulsion, the principle would hold that Tim is not morally responsible for his vote since he could not have acted otherwise. But since Tim voted for who he wished, the government's device had no impact on his vote whatsoever.

This sort of reasoning is supremely applicable to Stoic psychology. Returning to the idea of impressions and assents, as mentioned earlier, humans are different from non-humans because we possess the capacity for assent. However, humans do not possess the ability to have assented to impressions to which they withheld assent, nor could they have withheld assent to impressions to which they assented. In other words, our assents are as determined as any other part of the causal chain.[23] A simple example of this is that, given the education that you received, if you were presented with the impression that 2 + 2 = 3, you could not assent. Your past education, which influenced your faculty of reason, determined this.

Expanding on this, our total disposition to assent is known as our *prohairesis*.[24]

21 Harry G. Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility," *The Journal of Philosophy* 66, no. 23 (1969): 830.

22 Hank Green, "Compatibilism: Crash Course Philosophy #25," posted August 22, 2016, by Crash Course, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KETTtiprINU, 3:50–4:55.

23 Brennan, "Stoic Moral Psychology," 293.

24 Brennan, "Fate and Free Will," 276.

This can be understood as a person's character and their internal reason. Whenever we assent to an impression, we do so based on our *prohairesis*. It is what makes the selfish man accept a bribe, the curious man ask a question, and the vicious person act without mercy. Our *prohairesis* is shaped by our inherent nature and our experiences, and it is governed by *Logos*.

The concept of *prohairesis* is essential to understanding how the Stoics maintain freedom and moral responsibility within a determined framework of actions. As discussed earlier, the Stoics conceive of freedom in a negative sense—as freedom from external constraints. Building on this, when the Stoics speak of freedom, they mean freedom from forces outside our internal judgment. As Epictetus suggests, acting freely involves transcending external obstacles. For example, if your car breaks down, you are not free to drive to the store; external circumstances prevent you from doing so. However, if you are presented with the impression of going to the store and your *prohairesis* determines that you will withhold assent to this impression, the Stoics would argue that you still acted freely because no external force determined your decision, even though you could not have acted otherwise.

To illustrate this further, consider the voting thought experiment. If you initially intend to vote for President B but are externally forced to vote for President A, according to Stoic principles, you are not acting freely because you were compelled by an external force. However, if you voted for President A based on your internal disposition—your *prohairesis*, which never had the intention of voting for President B—you acted freely, even though your actions could not have differed from what occurred.

This is all to say that when humans act, they do so according to their *prohairesis*. It is impossible for someone to want to act any differently than their internal state would allow them to, and as mentioned earlier, our internal state is guided by our sense of reason. We can never act against our own sense of reason. If someone were to act irrationally, the Stoics would not say that they acted against their own sense of reason; rather, they would say that this person's sense of reason was misguided. Epictetus explains this as he writes, "When any person harms you, or speaks badly of you, remember that he acts or speaks from a supposition of its being his duty. Now, it is not possible that he should follow what appears right to you, but what appears so to himself."[25] This is important to the Stoics' understanding of freedom.

Before stepping too far away from our discussion of Stoicism and Frankfurtian compatibilism, one scholar's take on this is worth examining. In his piece "Stoicism and Frankfurtian Compatibilism," László Bernáth disagrees that the Stoics' conception of free will is similar to Frankfurt's. He writes:

> It is misleading and ultimately false to say that Frankfurt's and the Stoics' conception of free will are the same or notably similar to each other. Frankfurt has a contrafactual analysis of free will that refers to a psychological ability which is specific to humans and exercised by most people in most cases. In contrast, the Stoic considers free will as an aim for everybody that is achieved only by the sage, who can choose the option that she regards as the best one every time.[26]

25 Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*.

26 László Bernáth, "Stoicism and Frankfurtian Compatibilism," *Elpis*

I would like to focus primarily on Bernáth's understanding of the Stoic conception of free will. In his argument, Bernáth conflates Stoic freedom with libertarian free will. I noted that it is anachronistic to ascribe this to the Stoics, and it remains a common mistake in some of the literature.

Bernáth attributes the idea of free will directly to Epictetus.[27] As discussed earlier, when Epictetus used a rough translation of freedom, he almost certainly did so in the political sense to refer to being free from tyranny.[28] Bobzien clearly delineates Epictetus's idea of freedom from an understanding that more closely resembles free will:

> In these contexts of politics and ethics, freedom is never the freedom to decide between alternative courses of actions, or the power to do otherwise, or causal indeterminedness; nor is it ever connected with a two-sided potestative concept of that which depends on us. It is always the freedom of an individual (or group of individuals) from certain external or internal determining factors, thus providing a sphere in which the individuals are masters of their own affairs.[29]

Freedom, then, for Epictetus is much closer to the traditional Stoic understanding of the goal of life: to align oneself with Nature.[30] As discussed, we are a part of this very Nature, so aligning ourselves with it requires us to play the role we were assigned. In other words, we are free in so far as we accept our role in Nature. We are free when we embrace the negative freedom we have and do not protest the positive freedom that we lack.

In this way, Bernáth is right to assert that the sage operates with a greater sense of freedom than others. The sage is the one who acts with perfect virtue, and one does this by aligning oneself with Nature, which is the only true source of freedom. However, Bernáth describes the sage as the one who can "choose the option that she regards as the best one every time," but according to the Stoics, everyone does this. Each person acts based on their own internal sense of reason, their *prohairesis*.[31]

Sages do act properly on every occasion, but they do this because their sense of reason is perfectly aligned with Nature, not because they have better control over choosing between right and wrong. In fact, as Bobzien describes, "Sages, *qua* being wise, will have usually only one option they can take."[32] Because the sage's sense of reason is perfected, their internal state, their *prohairesis*, can only ever assent to true impressions and withhold assent from false ones. The Stoics believe that freedom entails aligning oneself with nature, which the sage does, but this does not mean that the sage has more "free will" than anyone else.

The Cone and The Cylinder

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27 Bernáth, "Stoicism and Frankfurtian Compatibilism," 69.

28 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 338.

29 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 338–39.

30 Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic,* 37

31 Bernáth, "Stoicism and Frankfurtian Compatibilism," 67.

32 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 341.

A key objection to Stoic compatibilism is that it emphasizes freedom from external constraints while simultaneously maintaining that our *prohairesis* is causally determined. In other words, we are free because we act how we wish, but how we wish to act is not determined by us. It may seem as though the Stoics are hiding the problem of freedom elsewhere. Perhaps we assent to an impression based on our own nature, but how can we hold someone responsible for their own nature if it is causally determined? Sure, a murderer may have assented to the impression of killing someone, but if that was driven by a *prohairesis* that was externally shaped, then wouldn't it be the events that shaped his *prohairesis* that determined he would kill someone? A timeless example is helpful in explaining how the Stoics would respond.

Dating back to Chryssipus, the Stoics illustrated their notion of moral responsibility and freedom with an example involving a cone and a cylinder. Imagine there is a cylinder sitting next to a cone. Then, someone gives both a push. Once they begin moving, their path is a result of their nature.[33] This is to say that the cylinder rolls straight because it is a cylinder and the cone rolls in a circle because it is a cone. It is not that the cylinder is necessarily the cause of its own shape, but rather the fact that the cylinder is of its own shape that it acts as it does. In determining moral responsibility, the Stoics would not concern themselves with asking how the murderer became one, but rather, they would argue that he is one.

It is a long quote, but Bobzien expresses her defense of compatibilism, and in turn, moral responsibility, most clearly in her discussion of this example. She writes:

> The point of the analogy then is that there are cases in which the external antecedent causes are similar . . . but the effects differ noticeably in kind; hence it follows that the nature of the objects at which the effect takes place (geometrical bodies, human beings) must be responsible for the difference in effect. This point is quite different from some modern arguments: Chrysippus defends responsibility by arguing that someone else would do something else in the same situation or that it is in the range of possible human behavior to do something else; he does not argue that the same person could do something else in the same situation.[34]

The most important point to highlight here is that when Stoics seek to explain moral responsibility, they do not try to explain what led to a person acting as they did; rather, they seek to show that an action comes from an agent rather than from something else. The example shows that it is not the push that determines the path of the figures, but rather their shape. Just as the cone is responsible for its circular path, so too is our *prohairesis* responsible for our actions. When we praise or blame someone for an action (hold them morally responsible), we are assigning value to their *prohairesis* as it is the cause of the action. And, as Epictetus says, we are our *prohairesis.*

With respect to the discussion of freedom, this example is interesting. One would not say that the cone is free to roll in a straight path, but that is because of its shape. It is up to the figure how it rolls. In this way, the cone is only free to act in accordance with its own nature. While this appears like a limited understanding of freedom, this aligns with the Stoic view that true freedom lies in acting in accordance with nature. Our actions are said to be free because they come from us—from *our* nature—rather than from the external forces that are outside of us. To the Stoics, it does not matter if who we are is shaped by external factors—the actions we take are still ours, and this is the way in which the Stoics consider actions to be free.

33 Brennan, *The Stoic Life,* 254.

34 Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom,* 268–69.

Conclusion

The Stoic understanding of freedom and moral responsibility is deeply complex, but it is tenable. All events occur within a framework of causal determinism driven by *logos*, including our actions. However, actions are up to us when we act beyond the external constraints of the world. This is due to our capacity for assent—the ability for us to consider how we should respond to external events (impressions). Whether we assent to an impression or not is part of the causal chain, and this is driven by our internal state called our *prohairesis.*

Humans do not possess the ability to act differently than they do; however, Frankfurt's defense of compatibilism reveals that so long as individuals act as they wish to act uncompelled by external forces, they are responsible for their actions. Unless physically compelled, humans always act as they wish to, which is determined by their *prohairesis,* and the Stoics argue that this is what freedom entails. To the Stoics, moral responsibility is not about asking how a person acquired a certain nature; rather, moral responsibility is about showing that a person's action came from them rather than from something else.

Each person has a different nature, a different *prohairesis*. Just as a cylinder is responsible for its straight path and a cone is responsible for its circular path, each person's internal state is responsible for the actions they take. Moral responsibility lies not in the freedom to choose contrary actions, but in our actions being our own. With the capacity for assent, external forces cannot be said to be responsible for our actions when it is our internal nature that decides how we act.

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