

## Further Remarks on Fate

What does ‘predetermined’ mean? Here is a suggestion.

The Stoics do speak of providence (cf. LS55M, Readings for 17 May 2016). But if this is the idea that there is a divine plan for the entire cosmic history, which thus sets out in advance everything that is going to happen at a certain point in the future, this would indeed invite the impression that we are mere puppets on strings, or pawns in a divine play of chess whose outcome is already settled. And this is, of course, what motivates the Lazy Argument (LS55S): if it is already fixed now what we will do later, or what will happen to us in two years time, then since this shall happen anyway, there is no, or little point in doing anything about it. Thing shall happen as they will anyway. However, I think this is not the ‘fatalism’ of the Stoics, even though there *is* a whiff of the above thought. But that needs a careful explication.

Fate is defined as the ‘inescapable ordering and interconnection of causes’ (see LS55J). Suppose we could stop the cosmic flow at some point and take an inventory of its maximal causal structure. Now suppose further that it is possible to know the causal regularities of nature, i.e. the laws of logic (including language) and physics (including psychology), or in short: the overall rational plan of the universe. Then it would be possible to predict the next step in the cosmic flow. This is because of *determinism*: the thesis that whatever happens now is bound to happen just as it does because of what happened in the immediate and distant past. This is the sense in which the past ‘fixes’ the present, and the present will ‘fix’ the future. And this means that future events will happen just as they will *because* of what is happening now. Given the total causal history of the cosmos immediately before a time makes unavoidable what is actually happening at that time. Given that there are no uncaused events for the Stoics, things really could not be different, given the cosmic causal past.

For instance, when I was cycling home after our meeting, I was waiting at the red light next to the Clarendon Building, when I saw a smiling woman with headphones walked around the corner. This brief episode was fated in the following sense: the woman’s causal history since her birth (including her zodiac sign), the character she developed in the course of her life (such as her love for Mozart, say), the history of that day to the minutest details, such as the time she started walking towards Broad Street, the fact that her music player was charged, the speed and width of her steps; and my own causal history, character (such as looking around when waiting at traffic lights), the state of my bike and thus the speed with which I got there from Rewley House, the time I left there, and so on: these causal facts and factors made it impossible for this episode not to take place. Given our individual causal trajectories, and given the overall cosmic flow up to that time, this two-second episode was bound to happen. Picking any event in your day yields the same point.

So, events like these are ‘predetermined’ only in the sense that given *prior* causes, they occur just as they do, and in no other way. For had they occurred in a different way, the causal history leading up to them would have had to be different

too. But in the Stoic cosmos, there is but one causal flow. And this flow plays out right in front of us; it is realised by us and everything else in this universe. For remember, the cosmic ‘plan’ is *immanent* in nature. When nature does what it does, when nature ‘natures’ (to hint at a phrase by Spinoza), then this is what fate is. In a snappy way, we could say, it is ‘fate as you go’.

But this does not mean we are powerless. We are not the witless objects in a (perhaps divine) ploy that happens anyway, whether we do something or not. For the Stoics, fate is more generous. In fact, I am tempted to say, fate needs our cooperation. It is possible that we develop our character. We might learn new things about the universe, including ourselves. We might decide to change our opinions of things. (In Stoic parlance, we reconsider our assent to certain impressions.) And yes, such a decision is fated too, in the sense that it is the causal consequence of our own causal trajectory: the things we experience, the sort of person we are, the opinions of others, and so on. Although determined itself (i.e. conditioned by prior events and facts), it means that our different actions become part of the causal fabric, and hence determine future events. This is, I take it, what Chrysippus means by ‘co-fate’.

Not only can we influence (in a rather modest way, though, for we cannot change the laws of nature) future occurrences, but fate also allows us freedom and happiness. This looks like a strange claim. But I think the following is a reasonable interpretation. We are unhappy and unfree if we resist the causal flow. Suppose I insist of getting to London in half an hour; suppose I believe that low pressure over Oxford means sunshine; suppose I think my work in philosophy suffices for tenure at Harvard; or suppose I regret not having taken maths more seriously. Insofar as these examples show a misunderstanding of cosmic regularities, a lack of self-knowledge, and sorrow about things past, I am *bound* to be unhappy. It is irrational to get worked up about things, such as those in the past, that are not ‘up to me’. It is not possible either to win against the world’s causal laws and reasons. (You mess with cosmic *pneuma* at your own peril.) What I can change, though, is the view of things—‘assent’. And in line with the Delphic oracle, I can try to know myself better, and thus understand that some of the things I wish for myself are perhaps unattainable, foolish, or not what I ‘really’ want anyway. (But remember: what I ‘really’ want is determined, once again, by my personal history.)

Instead, the Stoic way to flourishing, or Stoic ‘therapy’ (i.e. care) is to be content with what happens as it happens. The less we resist the causal flow, the less tension there is between my opinion of things and their reality. This is why it helps to understand the nature of things and of oneself. And insofar as we can optimise the match between what we want to happen to us with what actually happens but is not up to us, and thus ease tension and conflict, the more at home we can be with the cosmic flow. To the extent that we align ourselves, our beliefs about nature, other people and ourselves, to that cosmic flow, we can flourish; and we might even come to think that fate means well for us. And then, from a Stoic perspective, we are truly happy and free. And this is why Zeno says that happiness is ‘a good flow of life’ (see LS63A, Readings for 31 May 2016).

