Bringing Ancient Philosophy to Life: 
Teaching Aristotelian and Stoic Theories of Responsibility

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Introduction

One of the greatest challenges of teaching ancient philosophy to undergraduates is making the 2000-year-old material interesting and relevant to their lives. As fascinating as Presocratic first principles and Platonic forms may be to me, they just do not excite most students. But there is one issue I have found all students to be intrigued by: free will and moral responsibility. This is one of those timeless problems that every age since Aristotle has struggled with, and as such makes an ideal vehicle for simultaneously teaching students the history of philosophy and how to "philosophize" themselves.

There is a second advantage in addressing this issue in teaching ancient philosophy: it is a very interesting way to introduce students to Hellenistic philosophy, the period from Aristotle’s death to the turn of the millennium, including Stoic, Skeptic, and Epicurean schools. Professional research and publication in this area has grown quickly in the last generation, and increasing interest will require that Hellenistic philosophy be taught more extensively at the undergraduate as well as graduate levels. But many philosophy teachers seem hesitant to include material from this period, thereby creating the false impression that ancient philosophy died with Aristotle and Alexander the Great. When Hellenistic philosophy is taught it is usually via Epicurus and the late Stoics Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius; early Stoicism is especially neglected in the classroom.¹ Here I propose a strategy for bridging the gap from Aristotle to the Hellenistic period in a way that students will find important and relevant to
their lives: teaching the Aristotelian and early Stoic theories about determinism and moral responsibility. The strategy I will describe fits most easily into the traditional history of ancient philosophy course, but in the final section I will suggest a few ways it could be incorporated into other courses as well.

These two theories are historically significant and worth addressing because free will and determinism were first recognized as philosophically problematic in the Hellenistic period. The early Greeks considered "Fate" to be one of many divine forces, and Homer illustrates how frequently the gods were thought to interfere in human lives. It has been argued that the Greeks first considered the gods to be the direct source of human decision, and then gradually struggled free to see themselves as individuals with autonomy. This latter attitude reached its height in the fourth century B.C., when Aristotle recognized that nature necessitated certain things (e.g. that rocks fell downward, and fire rose upward), but that in the realm of human action "fate" had no role. Aristotle does not discuss "free will" per se, but in De Interpretatione he obviously considers fatalism (the view that everything happens of necessity, is predetermined) to be an absurd position, "for we see that what will be has an origin both in deliberation and in action, and that, in general, in things that are not always actual there is the possibility of being and not being" (19a7-10). While Aristotle, and Plato too, can probably be considered unconsciously libertarian, the early Stoics (Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus) burst upon the scene in the third century B.C. arguing that everything is causally determined. Their critics claimed that if this were so, then it would not be fair to punish wrongdoers, but the Stoics had an argument to show that it would still be fair. Epicurus had revived Democritean atomism, but rejected the mechanistic determinism that resulted from explaining everything in terms of atomic motion — instead he posited the uncaused "swerve" to rescue our voluntary actions from necessity. So while determinism has roots that stretch back to the earliest Greek times, it was first explicitly faced as a philosophical problem by the Stoics and Epicureans in the Hellenistic period. (Not quite all of philosophy is a footnote to Plato.)

My specific strategy is to focus on the debate between Aristotle and the early Stoics over whether "being able to do otherwise" is a necessary condition for being morally responsible for an action. In short, Aristotle says it is and the Stoics say it is not. While Aristotle does not discuss free will, he does explicitly address the issue of responsibility (for both actions and character) in the famous text of Nicomachean Ethics 3.1-5. He believes we are responsible for all our "voluntary" actions — actions in which we know what we are doing, and the "origin" of the action is "in us." Aristotle considers all such
actions to be in our power to perform or refrain from performing, so we really can do otherwise in these cases. If we cannot do otherwise then the action must be forced, and so involuntary, and so we are not responsible for it. The Stoics are an interesting foil to Aristotle, because they endorse what he found absurd — that everything happens necessarily and is predetermined to happen just as it does. We cannot do otherwise than whatever we in fact do because past events combined to cause us to perform this particular action. Nevertheless, the Stoics believe we are morally responsible for that inevitable act as long as we ourselves were its principal cause.

There is a continuity between the Aristotelian and Stoic theories that will make the transition from Hellenic to Hellenistic philosophy easy and natural. Students will be interested in the problem, and I believe both Aristotle and the Stoics have appealing positions, so that they will be perceived not just as irrelevant historical figures, but rather as philosophers with viable theories still worth considering. I think it is remarkable that the Stoics invented compatibilism yet there is not a single collection of readings on the free will problem that includes them. That is the sort of historical injustice I would like to see remedied by a more widespread inclusion of Hellenistic philosophy in undergraduate classes. In the second and third sections, I will describe these two theories in more detail and provide the textual sources, but first I would like to consider the social relevance of this issue since that is what motivates not only the students’ interest but also the current practical importance of all philosophical theories of free will.

Alcoholism, drug addiction, clinical depression, physical and emotional child abuse — these are problems most students today have personal experience of, and which raise difficult questions about free will and moral responsibility. Has an addict lost his “free will” in respect to drinking or using drugs? Even if he truly cannot stop himself from his destructive habit (i.e. he cannot do otherwise), is he still responsible for his behavior since he made himself into an addict? If he grew up in an alcoholic family and childhood abuse drove him to this sort of escape from reality, is he responsible and blameworthy for his condition? In a story from recent headlines, Susan Smith’s defense for drowning her two young sons included depression and sexual abuse by her estranged husband, her stepfather, and her boss. Can such factors excuse murder? (In fact, they did not, although they saved her from the death penalty.) Our society today is probably more understanding and empathetic regarding the determinants of deviant behavior than most past cultures, yet we are also concerned that people are abusing such excuses to escape all responsibility for their actions. *Glamour* magazine recently published an interview with a serial
rapist who tried to explain why he raped, and one reader wrote this response to the editor: "I don't care if rapists were themselves abused, if their mothers were weak, if their fathers were alcoholics, if they hated their sisters. I doubt the women they scar for life care either. Victims don't get a second chance, do they? Let's get tough on rapists now." ABC recently aired a program called "The Blame Game: Are We a Country of Victims?" in which John Stossel examined whether Americans are avoiding responsibility by declaring themselves victims. (The answer was obviously "yes," although many cases were provocatively uncertain.) So there is obviously a tension in today's society between these two beliefs — that our behavior is to some degree determined by factors we did not choose and cannot control, and that we must take some degree of responsibility for our behavior. The question is to what degree are we determined or free, responsible or blameless?

These issues will easily engage students in classroom discussion, and the teacher can first raise these questions in the context of contemporary society and the students' personal experiences and beliefs, and then use this discussion as a bridge to approach the theories of Aristotle and the Stoics. Shortly before I got to this segment in my present ancient philosophy course, our newspaper had a long detailed story on a local woman who is addicted to cough syrup and may go to jail (for the second time) because she goes from doctor to doctor lying in order to get more prescriptions. She pleads that her troubled life caused her addiction, and that she deserves drug therapy rather than jail time. I xeroxed this article for my class, and we used it as a case study to examine the issues of free will and responsibility. These sorts of stories are in the news so frequently that it would be easy for any class to find one to discuss as a current event. Then as the students learn the ancient theories they should be continually encouraged to apply them to such current issues. In the next section I will describe the Aristotelian and Stoic theories of responsibility and suggest some ways to relate these theories to students' lives.

Aristotle

Aristotle's views on responsibility are found in his discussion of voluntary action and decision in Nicomachean Ethics 3.1-5. These five chapters make a short though dense reading assignment and require a few hours of class time to be covered in lecture and discussion (chapter 2, on what decision is not, and chapter 4, on whether we wish for the actual good or the apparent good, can be skipped if necessary). If time permits, it is best to read NE 2.1-6 first — this is Aristotle's theory of what virtue is and how it is acquired (the highlights
are concisely repeated in 3.5). An important issue in itself, the subject of virtue acquisition will lead students directly to the next topic of free will and responsibility: e.g. my character (virtuous or vicious) is formed by my habits, but my habits were initiated by others when I was a child, so how can I help the character I have now? NE 2.1-6 is a short and fairly easy read and would require a couple more hours of lecture and discussion time. Both these selections (NE 2.1-6 and 3.1-5) are very frequently reprinted and can be found in many ancient philosophy and introduction to philosophy anthologies.\textsuperscript{6}

In NE 3.1 Aristotle specifies that a person’s action is voluntary if it both “originates within” that agent and he is aware of what he is doing in the appropriate sense. To say that the origin of the action is “in” the agent means that ultimately it is some form of desire within the agent that causes him to act.\textsuperscript{7} An action is involuntary when either one of these two criteria is not met: either the agent is ignorant of what he is doing, or the origin of the action is outside the agent rather than within him (e.g. he is physically forced to do something). In discussing ignorance as an exculpating factor, Aristotle mentions a case particularly relevant to college students: drunkenness. He says that we may act “in ignorance” when drunk, meaning that we are too inebriated to really know what we are doing, but this type of ignorance does not excuse us — whatever we do when drunk is voluntary, because our drunkenness causes our action, but we cause our drunkenness. Therefore the origin of the drunken act was “in us,” at least by one remove, so we are responsible for it. In fact, Aristotle notes, penalties are doubled for a drunk since he controls whether or not he gets drunk (NE 3.5, 1113b30-33). These same distinctions can be applied to actions caused by drug use. Aristotle is quite conservative in holding people responsible for the states they are in which cause their actions, and many students will agree with him. Other students will argue that forces beyond the agent’s control, e.g. heredity, the chemical balance of his body, abuse, bad environment, etc., are what really cause him to drink or use drugs, so that what he does in the consequent state of alcohol or drug use is not really his fault. Perhaps the origin of the drunken state is not within the agent, if he is an alcoholic who desires more than anything to quit drinking but nevertheless cannot stop himself. This question should spark lively debate among the students, and they will benefit from considering opposing views and critically evaluating their own.

Even the behavior of children and animals can be classified as voluntary or involuntary, because rationality is not involved in the two defining characteristics. But in the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle is concerned with the moral responsibility attaching to virtuous or vicious character, and only a mature rational human can possess virtue
or vice, because these involve decision. (Virtue is defined as an enduring state of character which decides what to do as the intelligent person would decide, viz. in accordance with the mean; NE 2.6, 1106b36-1107a6). Aristotle discusses decision in NE 3.3. An agent first wishes for some end he wants to achieve, then deliberates about the means required to achieve that end, and if these means are in his power he decides or chooses to do them. Decision is a species of voluntary action, so Aristotle considers it to be in the agent's power (i.e. it can be otherwise). What the agent wishes for and the means he decides to use to achieve it are both indicative of the virtue or viciousness of his character. But the agent is praised or punished not just for these deliberately chosen acts, but for all his voluntary acts. For instance, one is responsible for the above-mentioned drunken actions, and also for anything done on the spur of the moment out of desire but without forethought. In fact, the latter category describes a large proportion of the bad things people (especially young people) do, and students should have little trouble thinking of examples of this sort. Often one hears the excuse "I couldn't help myself" in such cases, and the students should consider whether or not they could. (Aristotle, of course, answers in the affirmative.)

It is not clear from what Aristotle writes in what sense he considers children responsible for their voluntary actions. They are not yet rational, and so incapable of deliberation, decision, virtue, and vice. Aristotle believes children's behavior is guided by their non-rational desires (i.e. "appetite" as opposed to "wish"), and they can be aware of the particular circumstances of what they are doing, and thus can act voluntarily. Should they be punished for their voluntary acts as adults are? Aristotle does not address this question directly. But he probably thinks as many of us do: children are punished in order to discipline them or correct inappropriate behavior, but once they become fully rational and capable of deliberation and decision then their wrongdoing is punished because they should have known better than to do wrong (after all, this is what all that childhood training was for) and so they now deserve punishment. There is a tricky problem here though. An irrational little child is largely molded by his family and society: to a great degree they determine what the child desires, what he sees as good and valuable, and how he sees himself. This is exactly the intended force of praise and punishment. But these are external determinants the child cannot control, so he cannot help what he is molded into. Yet in NE 3.5 Aristotle argues that adult character is voluntary and so in our power. Our character is constituted by our habits, and our habits are created by repeated voluntary actions — e.g. we become brave by performing brave acts, and intemperate by eating and drinking too much, etc. Only an idiot, Aristotle says, would
not realize that such repetition creates the corresponding character (1114a9-10). But the early years of a child’s repeated voluntary acts are controlled by adults, so is it really true that once the child reaches maturity his character is “in his power”?

By the end of 3.5 Aristotle seems to be admitting that perhaps one’s character is partly natural or innate: some people may by nature see what is truly good and so aim at the right end and become virtuous, while others just do not have this insight and so aim at the merely apparent good (which is really bad) and become vicious. Even if this were true (and it is not clear what Aristotle thinks), Aristotle insists that virtue and vice are voluntary and in our power because we are still “in some way” responsible or “jointly” responsible (jointly with nature?) for our character in so far as we voluntarily performed the individual actions which created the habits which constitute our character. If nature does play a role in character development, it is not a large enough role to lessen our culpability for our character. But can an adult be entirely blamed for his bad character if the bad habits which constitute that character were initiated in childhood by the aforementioned external forces which a child could not resist or control? Aristotle knows the power of law and example in children’s moral education, yet he shows no mercy in holding each adult accountable for the character he has and the actions he performs as a result of that character. Is he too harsh, or is this right? Are we each merely the product of our environment, or is there something unique in each of us that causes us to deal differently with the same environment? If the latter is true, are we each responsible for that unique something (be it soul or brain chemistry) so that we can take credit for overcoming obstacles and be blamed for succumbing to them? Or is that unique something, as well as our environment, the product of chance or the social lottery? As students consider these questions even the most libertarian among them should begin to see the draw of determinism. At this point they will be prepared to consider Stoic fatalism and the corresponding theory of responsibility.

The Early Stoics

One very practical reason that Hellenistic philosophy, and especially early Stoicism, has not been taught more is the inaccessibility of textual evidence. Epicurus’ philosophy is represented in a few surviving letters and in Lucretius’ On the Nature of Things; Hellenistic skepticism is explained in the post-Hellenistic book Outlines of Pyrrhonism by Sextus Empiricus (second century A.D.); but there are no extant letters or books by an early Stoic — all our evidence is in fragments. Luckily, Hellenistic philosophy has been made more accessible by
the recent publications of two collections of texts: *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, edited by Long and Sedley (1987), and *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, edited by Inwood and Gerson (1988). The latter is more suitable for undergraduate classes, and includes the wonderful feature of a glossary. Both books cover the Stoic, Skeptic, and Epicurean schools. The exact fragments needed to reconstruct the Stoic theory of determinism and responsibility that I will discuss will be provided in a note. These fragments together form a brief but dense reading assignment; the reading can be assigned for one day’s class, but it will take at least two or three classes to discuss, especially if the theory is applied to current issues and compared critically with Aristotle’s views.

The Stoics are thoroughgoing determinists, meaning that they consider every event to be the inevitable consequence of its antecedent causes. “Fate” refers to these causal connections in nature, which include human actions, and even thoughts and feelings. Humans are compared to dogs tied behind carts: “If he wants to follow, he is both dragged and follows, exercising his autonomy in conjunction with necessity. But if he does not wish to follow, he will nevertheless be forced to” (B77). Additionally, they believe that the entire sequence of causes and effects that constitutes our world order is the only possible sequence that could occur. They are pantheists and materialists, equating God, necessity, fate, and reason with the whole material world. God is both intelligent and good, and so makes the world the best it can possibly be. This is why things can only happen in one way: there is only one “best.” The Stoics also believe in “eternal recurrence” — this one sequence of cause-effect will end with the world’s conflagration, then begin all over again, exactly the same in every detail (including our personal recurrence), and this cycle will be repeated for all eternity.

Stoic determinism implies that given a set of causes, the effect follows of necessity and is the only effect that could occur. So given our environment, our physiological makeup, our “innate nature” if there is such a thing, and all other factors that affected our development, we are inevitably and necessarily the kind of person we are now, making exactly the decisions we do. If any causal factor had been different, we — the effect — would be correspondingly different. Conversely, suppose that if conditions a, b, and c exist, then effect z will follow. If effect x occurs instead, the Stoics say that there must have been causes other than a, b, and c this time, because to have the same causes but a different effect would introduce an uncaused event, which they assume is impossible. For example, suppose there are two children growing up in identical circumstances. They are poor, raised by unloving parents, attend substandard schools, and grow up surrounded
by violence and drug abuse. One child drops out of school, sells drugs, is in and out of jail, and is eventually shot to death in a gang related altercation. The other stays in school, gets government assistance to attend a technical college, becomes a mechanic, and lives a fairly comfortable life. Students will agree with the Stoics that there must be some difference in the causal conditions to account for such different results. If the external circumstances of the two children’s lives were the same, then there must have been some internal difference in their personalities. But the Stoics believe such internal factors are just as determined as external circumstances. Perhaps one child is born with a “lazy nature” which causes him to take the easiest way to achieve what he wants (e.g. money), while the other is naturally industrious. The Stoics think people have different natures, some virtuous and some evil, for the greatest cosmic good. Most students will not buy this; but they will understand how internal and external factors beyond one’s control, such as genetics, brain chemistry, and social environment, can “determine” one’s personality. The Stoics just hold a very extreme version of what many people accept in a weaker form.

The Stoics recognize the efficacy of trying to make things happen one way rather than another, but insist that one’s effort is “co-fated” with the result. This is their response to the famous “Lazy Argument,” which asks why bother going to the doctor when we are sick if our recovering or not recovering is already determined (B70)? We should bother because recovering is co-fated with receiving medical help; dying is co-fated with lying home in bed and doing nothing. This makes perfect sense, but the Stoics are such consistent determinists that whatever we decide to do is determined by our personality, which is determined by prior factors, which are determined by further prior factors, and so on. The net result is that we can never do otherwise than whatever we in fact do, given the antecedent conditions which also could not be otherwise than they were.

Despite the fact that we cannot ever do otherwise, the Stoics still consider us morally responsible for our actions, so that we can be praised or blamed for what we do. This is the earliest form of soft determinism or compatibilism, and is defended primarily by the Stoics’ distinction between “perfect and principal” causes and “auxiliary and proximate” causes (B76, B79). The former refers to aspects of something’s or someone’s nature that cause him/her/it to react as they do to stimuli; these can be thought of as internal causes and in the case of human agents are said to be “in our power.” The latter refers to the stimuli outside of something’s or someone’s nature, which can be thought of as external causes and are not “in our power.” For instance, it is the round nature of a cylinder that causes it to roll when
pushed downhill. What gives it the push is the proximate cause of its motion, but its roundness is the principal cause. In the more complex case of human action, “the character of one’s mind” is the perfect and principal cause of what one does (B79).

The Stoics explain action in terms of three components: presentation, assent, and impulse. A “presentation” is a sort of image in the mind, caused by and representing something external. “Assent” is the mind’s agreeing to some proposition about a presentation. “Impulse” is the internal movement of the mind (or soul) in response to the assent, and is the immediate cause of the person’s moving to get or avoid something. What causes the presentation is external, and is the auxiliary and proximate cause of the agent’s response, and therefore is not “in his power.” But the agent’s assent and impulse (which manifest or constitute the character of his mind) is the perfect and principal cause of his action, and is “in his power.” The Stoics believe that as long as our character, our assent and impulse, is the principal cause of what we do, that action is “in our power” and we are responsible and blameworthy for it. It is irrelevant that we could not do otherwise. The early Stoics hold that “what is in our power is included in fate” (B78). In a text that is unfortunately missing from Inwood and Gerson’s book, it is explained that the Stoics redefine “in our power” so that it no longer means what is up to us to do or refrain from doing (the Aristotelian sense), but instead refers to anything that comes about “through us.” This is another way of saying we are the principal cause, or the cause is internal to us.

According to this theory of responsibility, we are blameworthy for what we do just because we do it. There are no extenuating circumstances that will excuse us. We may be fated to steal, but as Zeno said, we will then be fated to be flogged. Apparently most people in the ancient world held Aristotle’s view that one can only be fairly praised or blamed for an action that is truly in one’s power to perform or refrain from performing. There are numerous reports of this objection to the Stoics (B78 and 79), and it is still the most common response to determinism: if someone cannot help what he does then it is not fair to hold him responsible for it. But in an age when so many people blame the bad things they do on addictions (to drugs, sex, exercise, approval, ...), environment, heredity, etc., perhaps we should reconsider the Stoic view of responsibility. It is rather harsh, but has a certain intuitive appeal. Let us assume that a person cannot control his genetic makeup, his brain’s chemical activity, how his parents raised him, and the environment in which he was raised. Let us even assume that he cannot control his innate nature which causes him to react as he does to the aforementioned stimuli. Still, all these factors combine to produce him, as he is. And it is he who does the bad
things. There may be a causal explanation for why he steals or rapes, but what is most important is that he is the agent. Regardless of what made him that way, it was his decision or desire or spur of the moment passion that caused him to act. As long as there was no external force compelling him to act, he himself caused his action. Perhaps this is enough to hold him responsible and punish him. Perhaps as we come to understand the many physiological and social determinants of character and behavior we should modify our traditional conception of responsibility. But rather than accepting that if we are so greatly determined that we cannot be or do otherwise, then we are not responsible for our behavior (i.e. hard determinism), perhaps we should adopt the Stoic view that we are responsible for any act of which we are the principal cause.

I am not advocating one position over the other, nor do I do so in class. I think both Aristotelian and Stoic views are appealing, though both are extreme. What I really hope to accomplish in class is to lead the students through the process of first weighing the pros and cons of these two positions and then formulating a more satisfactory theory that may lie somewhere between the two extremes. This illustrates for them an important methodology of philosophy, and is one part of teaching them "how to philosophize." For instance, Aristotle believes we can do otherwise as long as we are not being physically forced by someone else; but there is little room in this view for internal compulsions such as addictions and psychological obsessions. The Stoics, on the other hand, believe that we can never do otherwise, as if all our actions were the result of addictions; but this view seems to allow no place for sheer "will." What I have my students do after learning and evaluating these two positions is to try to come up with their own version, based on their beliefs about what one can and cannot control. (This is where current knowledge about things such as the effect of the brain's chemical activity on feelings and behavior may alter the ancient theories.) Then, given their beliefs about what one can control, they formulate examples or criteria of what one is morally responsible for. This exercise can be done by each student independently, but I prefer to put them into small groups so they can compare their views and brainstorm, and then have each write a short paper expressing his or her own position. Many students get so interested in this topic that they decide to use it for their longer term paper. Of course, it is too much to expect the students to invent complete and consistent philosophical theories — the professionals are having a difficult enough time at that. The point is to get them to think about, express, and critically evaluate their own views, and to listen to and consider other peoples' views — and they learn an important chunk of the history of philosophy along the way. In fact, as they are at-
tempting to formulate their own views I think it is also important to inform them that contemporary philosophers are still debating this problem and are trying to come up with the solution just as the students are in this exercise. This will teach them that philosophy is still alive and well, and is not just a matter of learning the opinions of our revered but dead philosophical ancestors. Mention could be made of contemporary articles that can be seen as attempts to mediate between the libertarian and determinist positions, such as Harry Frankfurt’s “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person” and Charles Taylor’s “Responsibility for Self.” Such articles could even be put on reserve in the library for the occasional industrious student inspired enough to pursue this topic.

Conclusion

In closing I would like to make a few brief suggestions about the larger class context in which the Aristotelian and Stoic theories of responsibility can be taught. In a course specifically on the history of ancient philosophy the issue of responsibility and determinism can be broadened to encompass other philosophers, such as Leucippus and Democritus, Plato, and Epicurus. As I mentioned earlier, determinism as a philosophical problem was not recognized until the Hellenistic period, but the Greeks always wondered how large a role the gods played in human life. As mythology gave way to science with the invention of philosophy, the gods receded into the background; they were still objects of worship, but no longer dabbled so directly in individuals’ lives (as they were portrayed as doing in the Iliad, for instance). But the force of the gods was sometimes replaced with the force of nature. The Presocratics Leucippus and Democritus invented the atomic theory, the first scientific theory to imply determinism. But while Epicurus later recognized this consequence, it is not clear that the early atomists themselves did so. None of the fragments of or about Democritus mentions this, although the only surviving fragment of Leucippus is tantalizing: “Nothing happens in vain, but everything for a reason and by necessity.” This aspect of atomism would be especially helpful to discuss if the class will include Epicurus.

Plato never confronts determinism directly, but his ethical theory, expressed in nearly every dialogue, emphasizes each person’s responsibility for “caring for his soul” and making himself virtuous or vicious. In the myth of Er in book X of the Republic Plato even suggests that after we are punished or rewarded for how we conducted our last life we each get to choose what our next life will be like. Our choice is somewhat limited by the number and types of lives we are given to choose from, and by what has already been chosen by the
souls ahead of us in line. But it is mainly our own innate character and what we have learned in our prior lives, our wisdom or foolishness, that determines our choice. Lachesis, daughter of Necessity and one of the three Fates, tells the souls about to choose: "Your guardian spirit will not be assigned to you, you will choose him. Let him who has the first lot be the first to choose a life which will of necessity be his. Virtue knows no master, each will possess it in greater or lesser degree according as he honors or disdains it. The responsibility is his who makes the choice, the god has none" (617e). In Socrates' second speech in the *Phaedrus* it is again claimed that each soul is responsible for its next life, "each choosing according to her will" (249b). Plato never directly addresses the problem of determinism and responsibility as the Stoics do, but we can see in his mythology the assumption that we each bear the major responsibility for the condition of our lives. If this theme is brought out by the teacher in the discussion of Plato, the students will see more continuity and development from Plato to Aristotle to the Hellenistic period.

A course on ancient philosophy could also include Epicurus, who joined the Stoics in the Hellenistic debate over determinism. Epicurean atomism, like its Democritean predecessor, was completely mechanistic in its explanation of motion: all motion, including human action and even thought, was the inevitable consequence of atomic collision. Epicurus was so eager to avoid this mechanistic determinism that he posited the infamous "swerve": at certain times there would be an uncaused swerve by one or more atoms, the purpose of which was to break the causal chain, at least in the case of voluntary human action. This uncaused swerve was greatly ridiculed by ancient critics as an ad hoc solution to the problem of determinism. But perhaps the students can find an interpretation of the swerve theory that makes it plausible; if not, they will at least see the lengths to which philosophers will go to avoid the unwanted consequences of their theories.

The Aristotelian and Stoic theories need not be limited to courses on ancient philosophy — I think they would well represent an important aspect of ancient thought in any course covering such ethical and metaphysical issues as responsibility and determinism. They can be mixed and matched with other philosophers depending on the course's focus. For instance, they can be paired with: the religious problems of God's foreknowledge, predestination, and human free will in St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas; Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence (taken directly from the Stoics) and his view of determinism; or Hume's or anyone else's theory of soft determinism or compatibilism (of which the Stoic theory was the prototype).

Even in a more advanced course on metaphysics or the free will problem, which would normally focus on contemporary texts
perhaps go back to the Modern period for a historical perspective, I believe that Aristotle and the Stoics could be profitably included as the inventors of the problem. Their discussions of the issues may be somewhat simplistic compared to the highly analytic and technical nature of today’s debate, but I believe that is the advantage of starting a class at the historical beginning of a problem. The students, after all, are just beginning to explore the problem of free will, so why not teach them the fundamental concepts involved via Aristotelian libertarianism and Stoic compatibilism and then proceed to the more complex contemporary arguments? Familiarity with the ancient views will also serve the students well when they encounter references to these views in current work, such as Chisholm's attribution of his agent-causation theory to Aristotle.

Those of us who teach philosophy already love the discipline, but it may become increasingly difficult with time to see our material through the eyes of our students, who often want a justification for spending their time and money in our classes. I have a friend whose daughter was a straight “A” major in both philosophy and molecular biology at a prestigious eastern university. She decided to go on in biology instead of philosophy in part because, as he told me, "she wanted to address live and important questions and her impression of philosophy was, in her words, ‘Ancestor Worship.’" I find it very sad that philosophy is so often taught this way, and one bad experience may turn a student away for life. I first encountered philosophy in high school, and quickly decided to abandon all the “more practical” careers I had been considering because it seemed to me that philosophy was the most fundamental and most important discipline there was. I have never changed my mind on this point, but must continually struggle to make my students see this as well. The strategy I have outlined in this paper for teaching ancient philosophy has helped me accomplish this goal, and I am sure it would work for others.

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WORKS CITED


**NOTES**

1. I am *not* claiming that no one studies or teaches any Hellenistic philosophy. The majority of textbooks on the history of ancient philosophy do contain selections representing Stoic, Skeptic, and Epicurean thought. My point is that Hellenistic philosophy, and especially *early* Stoicism, is not taught very frequently. From what I know, Stoic philosophy, when taught at all, is usually taught using the *late* Stoics Seneca (c.1-65 A.D.), Epictetus (c. 55-135), and Marcus Aurelius (Roman emperor 161-180). Their ethical theory is a simplification of early Stoicism, saying basically that the external circumstances of one's life are determined but one's *attitude* towards those circumstances is truly free (i.e. can be otherwise in the Aristotelian sense). This theory suffers from the obvious defect of ignoring the effect of attitude on circumstances. It is a philosophy of passivity and resignation, and this, combined with its logical flaws, makes it
(I believe) uninteresting. The original Stoic theory, on the other hand, is harshly uncompromising in maintaining a consistent determinism; it is the theory of responsibility they hold in the face of a consistent determinism that is interesting and worth considering.

2. See for instance Pamela Huby’s “The First Discovery of the Freewill Problem,” and Charles Kahn’s “Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine.”

3. I take this to be the general point of Bruno Snell’s The Discovery of the Mind. He says, for instance, “Homeric man has not yet awakened to the fact that he possesses in his own soul the source of his powers; ... he receives them as a natural and fitting donation from the gods” (p. 21).


5. August 17, 1995, 10 p.m. eastern time.

6. Most recently, Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy from Thales to Aristotle, edd. Cohen, Curd, and Reeve; Classics of Western Philosophy, ed. Cahn.

7. For this point I am supplementing NE with the theory of On the Motion of Animals (MA), a move which nearly all scholars would sanction. NE 3.1 alone does not explain “the origin within the agent” in terms of the agent’s desire, but says only “in these sorts of actions he has within him the origin of the movement of the limbs that are the instruments <of the action>, and when the origin of the action is in him, it is also up to him to do them or not to do them” (I110a15-18). This sounds as if the origin is in the agent as long as it is some impetus inside his body which moves his limbs, as opposed to his limbs being forcibly moved by someone or something external. The whole point of the MA is to refine and clarify this explanation of voluntary bodily motion.

8. We do have complete works by late Stoics, but by then (the first and second centuries A.D.) Stoic theories had been seriously revised, so these works are seldom useful in studying early Stoicism. They are, however, complete and easy and pleasant to read, which accounts for their usually being the sole representative of the Stoic school.

9. For undergraduate classes I prefer Inwood and Gerson’s book; in parentheses are the corresponding fragments in Long and Sedley. The minimum texts that students should read are B67 (54T), B70 (55S and 70G), B74 (61M), B76 (62C), B77 (62A), B78 (62F), and B79 (62D). Anyone with more time to spend on Stoicism can supplement these suggestions to go in the philosophical direction of his or her choice. Many of these fragments are included in Saunders’ Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle, in the chapter “Early Stoic Physics,” section “Fate, Destiny, and Providence” (pp. 101-110). Many instructors use this series of books when teaching the history of philosophy, but it does not work so well for my present purpose because the first volume, Allen’s Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle, contains NE book 2 but not book 3.1-5.

10. It is a bit controversial for me to claim that the early Stoics consider even thoughts and feelings to be necessary and fated, because many scholars interpret Stoic determinism in a weaker sense (e.g. A.A. Long in “Freedom and Determinism in the Stoic Theory of Human Action”). But the fragments on fate report that everything is determined, with no noted exceptions, and Chalcidius reports: “(The Stoics say that) all things have been fixed and arranged from the beginning, including those which are said to be situated in our power and those said to be fortuitous and subject to chance. ... The movements of our minds are nothing more than instruments for carrying out determined decisions since it is
necessary that they be performed through us by the agency of fate. Thus men play the role of a necessary condition, just as place is a necessary condition for motion and rest.” (Commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* 160-161; Long’s translation in “Freedom and Determinism,” p. 177.)

The teacher must interpret such controversial points as he or she sees fit.

11. Students find the doctrine of eternal recurrence amusing but utterly unpersuasive; Stoic theology gets a mixed reaction — it is similar in many ways to the traditional Christian conception of God, and by virtue of that resemblance some students find it appealing. The teacher must use his or her own discretion in deciding how much background material to Stoic determinism to incorporate. In a class dealing with other religious issues Stoic theology would be worth addressing.

12. Of course, it is impossible for the circumstances to be *identical*; for the sake of argument let’s say they are as close as possible.


14. Diogenes Laertius 7.23 (Long and Sedley 62E).


16. The swerve is mentioned in Inwood and Gerson, texts A13, A14, A16, A66, A67, and B72. A good secondary source is Walter Engelert’s *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, which also analyzes Epicurus’ debt to Aristotle in this area.

17. Such as Gary Watson’s *Free Will*.

18. No offense to contemporary philosophers, but sometimes the analytic style and technical jargon of current articles puts me to sleep before I get to their main point. This does not occur when I read Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* or Stoic fragments, and perhaps I am not alone.