

Two (or Three) Theories of Causality

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Abstract

This paper asks whether the Stoics put forward a theory of causation. For this to be an apt description, there needs to be a sufficiently unified notion of causation that the Stoics take themselves to address. Alternatively, there may be several Stoic theories that address aspects of what today we might call a theory of causation. Ancient philosophers use a range of terms that, roughly, cover the spectrum of cause, principle, starting-point, origin, ground, and explanation—among them *archê*, *aition*, and *aitia*. In reconstructing ancient theories, scholars tend to remark upon the difficulty that none of the relevant terms means, in any simple or straightforward sense, cause. The resulting difficulties are so far under-explored with respect to the Stoics. What, then, should we say about causes in Stoic physics? This paper starts with a close look at what may appear to be two kinds of causality in Stoic physics, Prime Causality and Compound Causality, as I call them.

Prime Causality is the causality of the active principle. The active principle is self-moving and moves everything, thus being the cause of the world's history. It is a cause insofar as it is a qualifier of matter. As such it makes each entity what it is; and this includes that it makes each entity the cause it is. Compound Causality is the causality of these entities. As parts of the world, compounds co-cause the world's history.

Compound-causes are causes to each other. The active principle is a body; but it is not one body among others that, on par with each other, act on each other. Hence the active principle and compounds are different kinds of causes. Does this leave the Stoics with two theories of causality? Both are unified, I argue, insofar as they share a minimal common notion of causality: a cause, an *aition*, is a “*di ho*,” a because-of-which, and a body.

This minimal notion of cause raises the question of why matter does not qualify as a cause. Is matter a third kind of cause? Matter, for the Stoics, is an *archê*, just as the active principle is. In other ancient theories, *archê* is a core term for cause. Why, then, should it be evident that matter, also called the passive principle, is not a cause in Stoic physics? A simple reply says that matter is entirely passive. Though it is corporeal, it is not a because-of-which. However, this simple reply does no more than assert what is needed to make the theory work. It fails to ask, in any serious sense, what because-of-which means. There are at least two ways in which matter could be a because-of-which. First, in an explanation of the universe, one must appeal to matter just as one

appeals to the active principle. Second, it is because of matter and the active principle that the world is what it is.

Add to this that the Stoics took themselves to improve upon Aristotle, saying that they do not put forward a “swarm of causes.” Against the Stoics, their uncharitable Peripatetic critic Alexander says that they do exactly that: introduce a swarm of causes. For one, Chrysippus distinguishes between *aitia* as explanation and *aition* as cause; a distinction which does away with the presumed simplicity of offering no more and no less than one notion in order to address the kinds of concerns that others theorize in terms of *archê*, *aition*, and *aitia*. More than that, the Stoics care a great deal about fate and responsibility. In this context, they must explain how antecedent causes relate to the ways in which an agent, on the spot and by herself, acts. They also must explain what happens when an agent is aided by another agent who co-causes what she does. This leaves them with explanations versus causes, the active principle as cause, each entity in the universe as cause, the passive principle as principle, as well as antecedent (*prokatartika*) and conjoining causes (*sunergon*, *sunaitia*). The Stoics, it may seem, couldn’t do a worse job in trying to get away from, only—as now one might say—four Aristotelian causes.

This paper aims to save the Stoics from this charge. It argues that ultimately the minimal notion of a cause as a bodily because-of-which is a unified Stoic notion of cause. A distinction between explanation and cause is a welcome way of clarifying things, rather than a way of cluttering one’s theory with different items. The Stoic view that matter is a principle genuinely differs from views that take matter to be a cause. And antecedent and conjoining causes are ultimately nothing other than some of the causes that co-cause the history of the world. In sum, the Stoics are left with the active principle as cause and all entities in the world, individuated by the active principle, as causes. Their theories of Prime Causality and Compound Causality do not compete: they are two ways of describing how a unified causality co-causes all movement in the physical universe.