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Wittgenstein and Stoic Fatalism

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the relation between young Wittgenstein's philosophy and the Stoic concept of fate. In the first part, we discuss the current knowledge on Wittgenstein's direct or indirect acquaintance with Stoic doctrines. We show that there is no evidence confirming that he was directly knowledgeable of Stoicism; rather, his knowledge of it was probably limited and mediated by secondary sources, partly by Schopenhauer, and partly by Russell, Moore and his other British associates. In the second part, we discuss some aspects of the Stoic and Schopenhauer's doctrines of will and fate and their (dis)similarities to Wittgenstein's dealings with similar issues in his early texts. We conclude that, while Wittgenstein cannot be considered to have been a fatalist, and his early philosophy is not to be described as stoical in essence, there are still some motives that resemble Stoic philosophy.

Introduction

Contemporary interpretations of Wittgenstein's thoughts on the problem of will usually recognize two main influences which informed his early views: empiricist tradition (Hobbes, Locke, James, Russell) and Schopenhauer's philosophy. Hacker, in his book, focuses on empiricist tradition; however, in one of his footnotes, he states that there is a strand in Wittgenstein's early reflections on will that takes on a form of stoical fatalism, although he chooses not to examine it (Hacker 2000: 211).

To discuss the relation between Stoic fatalism and Wittgenstein's philosophy, we should first examine whether he was, in any way, acquainted with Stoic philosophy in general. To date, there seems to be almost no research on Wittgenstein relation with Stoicism or his knowledge of Stoic doctrines, while there is only a highly limited number of works that have attempted to investigate a general systematic relation between Stoic philosophy and that of Wittgenstein. There are some remarks, such as those of Wiggins (2004: 374), which briefly refer to Stoic philosophy when discussing the independence of the transcendent subject from this world, or those of Botros (1985: 278) who includes a quotation from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* in a footnote discussing Stoic philosophy. Goldstein (2002: 426) speculates that Wittgenstein's early proposal regarding solving the problem of paradoxical sentences is related to the Stoic doctrine of *lekta*, but his knowledge of this doctrine was probably mediated by Russell or Moore and Meinong. Schroeder (2011) believes that Wittgenstein's early works were deeply influenced by Stoicism; however, he believes that all his knowledge of Stoic doctrines was derived from Schopenhauer's account of it in §16 in the first volume of his *The World as Will and Representation*. Only Sattler (2014) tried to provide a Stoic reading of the ethics in *Tractatus* and, later on, those in *Lecture on Ethics* (2013). Other than that, it would seem that, if we rely on the literature, Wittgenstein's and Stoic philosophies do not seem directly related to a significant extent.

There might however be some indirect influence. Stoic philosophy was very influential in the development of British empirical thought. Philosophers connected with the Scottish Enlightenment – a period in 18th and early 19th century Scotland – such as Francis Hutcheson, David Hume or Adam Smith were familiar with Stoic tradition and absorbed many aspects and key elements of Stoic works in their philosophical systems, as Maurer (2016) demonstrates in his article.

Typically, the founders of analytical tradition also highly regarded Stoic tradition (as opposed to the German idealistic tradition and especially Hegelian philosophy). For example, Moore mentions Stoic ethical teaching in his *Principia Ethica* (1903); meanwhile, Long (1970: 86) reveals that Moore's criticism of the metaphysical aspects of Stoic moral philosophy is based on some misunderstandings, with Botros (1985: 275) concluding that Stoicism cannot be understood as a precursor of Moore's soft determinism. Russell was probably well acquainted with Stoic teaching, and even discusses it in his *A History of Western Philosophy* (1961); but, other than that, we do not know much about his relation to this philosophical tradition.

Stoic approach to fate and Wittgenstein

Botros (1985) describes the Stoic approach to fate in her detailed article about the concept of causality in Stoic philosophy. Stoic physics was extremely deterministic, with philosophers influenced by Stoicism believing that every event has a cause and that the same antecedents always produce the same outcomes, meaning that there are long causal chains of connected events. The Stoics concluded that if one knew the "inner connections of all causes, then surely he would never be mistaken in any prediction" (Cicero 1923: 1.127). The Stoics therefore believed that, because of this internal connection of causes, the knowledge of future events is possible: in a perfect manner for gods, in an imperfect manner (in the form of divination) for men.

This can be contrasted with Wittgenstein's claim that "[t]he freedom of the will consists in the fact that future events *cannot* be KNOWN now" (NB 1979: 43). It is interesting that he bases this freedom on the impossibility of the *knowledge* of future events. Today, it is much more common to discuss free will as being conceptually linked to *possibility* – an action was a product of free will, if it was possible to act differently, or not act at all – in contrast with determinism, which claims that there is no such possibility (Taylor and Dennett 2011).

The Stoics also believed that, although knowledge of the "inner connections of all causes" was "possible only to god", it was still possible for mere men to "predict the future by means of certain signs, which indicate what will follow them" (Cicero 1923: 1.127). While this statement about basing predictions of the future on the observation of "signs" can also be used to describe modern scientific approaches (predictions based on the observation of repetitive patterns), the Stoics were known for their belief in divination. This belief in divination was based on their belief of causal chains and their fatalism (Botros 1985: 278).

These aspects of Stoic thoughts can again be compared with Wittgenstein's early ideas. While the Stoics believed that causes are internally connected, Wittgenstein refutes such a connection. He says that knowledge of the future is possible "if causality were an INNER necessity – like, say, that of logical inference". It is obvious that he believes that, while logical inference carries "inner necessity", there is no such strong "inner" connection in the case of physical causality. Wittgenstein (in his later lectures) also explicitly argues against the premise that the same antecedents always produce the same outcomes – he refers to the example of two indistinguishable seeds, where one produces a poppy and the other a rose (Wittgenstein 1976: 434). Even in *Tractatus*, he says: "There is no compulsion making one thing happen because another has happened" (TLP 1922: 6.37). Scheer (1991) therefore argues in favor of Wittgenstein's causal indeterminism. While indeterminism makes

Wittgenstein's theory different from Stoical theory to a greater extent, it also makes the concept of free will influencing the external world more plausible. This opportunity, however, remains unexploited, and no complex theory of free will or action is developed in *Tractatus*.

While the description of Stoic philosophy provided above seems to suggest that the Stoics were devoted fatalists who did not accept the possibility of free will, they, however, asserted that human action is ἐφ' ἡμῶν ("in our power"). This, nonetheless, does not involve the existence of alternative possibilities of action, but simply states that "what is attributable to us is what comes about through us" (Sharples 1983: 58/181.13). We agree with Botros (1985: 285) who refuses to interpret Stoicism as soft determinism, as, e.g., Sorabji (1979) does, and claims that there is a widespread misunderstanding of the Stoics with regard to their conception of freedom, which stretches back to the ancient commentators. The problem with the freedom of will as conceived by modern philosophers probably did not occur to the ancient Stoics.

If there was any influence of the Stoics on Wittgenstein, it was probably partially deformed by an imprecise reading of their conception of causality and fate by later interpreters. It seems nonetheless interesting, as we mentioned above, that, in his *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein discusses the problem with the freedom of will in terms of knowledge of the future, rather than in terms of the possibility of alternative actions, i.e., in the same manner as the ancient Stoics.

Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer on will and fate

In *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein fluctuates between ideas influenced by empiricist thinkers and Schopenhauer. When he discusses the content of his imaginary book *The World I Found*, he claims: "I should also have to report on my body and say which members [Glieder] are subject to my will, etc." (NB 1979: 50, we believe that "Glieder" should be translated here as "limbs"). He assumes that this approach is necessary because it allows for "isolating the subject", even when "in an important sense there is no such thing as the subject" (NB 1979: 50). This expression reminds us of Schopenhauer, who distinguished between the sensory experience of the world (mere appearance or "representation") and the *will*, which he claims everyone will recognize "as that which is directly known to him so intimately" (Schopenhauer 1909: 157). However, Schopenhauer claimed (following Kant) that what we "experience" as *will* is not part of the spatiotemporal world of appearances, but rather a manifestation of the noumenal world, the Kantian thing-in-itself. The noumenal substrate of the *will* is undifferentiated and therefore the same for every being. The *will* is, therefore, for Schopenhauer, not some "thing" in the world of appearances.

Similarly, following the above-mentioned discussion, Wittgenstein claims that, while a precise description of what is controllable by *will* enables us to isolate the subject, we must be aware "that in an important sense there is no such thing as the subject" (NB 1979: 50). Such a claim can be well aligned with describing Wittgenstein's subject as a transcendental subject and Wittgenstein as a transcendental idealist, as Williams (1981) does – based on *Tractatus* and later works (it should be noted that some authors such as Mulhall (2009) disagree with this interpretation). We ought to state, however, that Anscombe (1959: 11f) reports that Wittgenstein had read Schopenhauer as a 16-year-old boy "and had been greatly impressed by Schopenhauer's theory of the 'world as idea' (though not of the 'world as will'); Schopenhauer then struck him as fundamentally right, if only a few adjustments and clarifications were made".

Schopenhauer discusses Stoic philosophy very briefly in §16 of the first volume of his famous work, where he says "the outer world, which is independent of us, determines good and bad fortune" (1909: 134). Probably those statements could be the source of Wittgenstein's fatalistic statements in *Tractatus*, such as "The world is independent of my will" (TLP 1922: 6.373, NB 1979: 73).

Conclusion

Tractatus, as a whole, provides a painstakingly precise description of a picture theory of propositions – a theory of the representation of the world in our language. However, a theory describing our active interaction with any world, explaining how our ability to change the world fits into this picture, is almost completely missing. It is impossible to deal with the problem of will using logical tools developed in *Tractatus*, because “there is no logical connexion [sic] between will and world” (TLP 1922: 6.374). This claim is accompanied with a brief strain of thought with a fatalistic character – more detailed in *Notebooks* than in *Tractatus* – such as the previously quoted “The world is independent of my will” (TLP 1922: 6.373, NB 1979: 73) and “I cannot bend the happenings of the world to my will: I am completely powerless” (NB 1979: 73).

However, there is also a second strain that tries to find a relation between will and the world, where Wittgenstein says, “I know [...] That my will penetrates the world. That my will is good or evil” (NB 1979: 73). However, the influence of the will on the world is of a very special kind: “If good or evil willing affects the world it can only affect the boundaries of the world” (NB 1979: 73, TLP 1922: 6.43). Starting this sentence with “If” also betrays uncertainty when dealing with this topic. While he sees the need to express the active relation of a subject to the world in terms of will (and action), his system makes him unable to do so, because “outside logic everything is accidental” (TLP 1922: 6.3). Some authors such as Kelly (1995: 572) tried to address this problem by distinguishing between *empirical will*, which is simply another fact in the world, and *transcendental will*, which is ethical, but incapable of effecting changes in the empirical world. This distinction may be plausible; however, it is still unable to explain the precise relation between transcendental will and the world (or its boundaries).

It seems to us that Wittgenstein himself was unable, at that time, to find a solution to this problem that would fully satisfy him and fit into the system of *Tractatus*. That said, it seems (and it is apparent in his *Notebooks*) that he attempted several approaches, with the approach resembling Stoic fatalism being one of them. However, unlike Sattler (2014), we do not believe that the ethics (and the theory of action) of *Tractatus* can be interpreted as Stoical in its character, or that it includes a coherent theory of transcendent will.

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