THE FATE DEBATE:
Stoic Responses to Contemporary Reflections

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The debate over the concas for the human condition is as old as the ancient Greeks. This fate debate has tremendous philosophical importance since it turns on a dispute over our understanding of human nature and the nature of the world. Despite its truly fundamental significance, however, fate has been largely neglected by contemporary philosophers until its recent recovery by Michael Gelven.[1] In his fresh and often insightful inquiry, Gelven presents his account of an existentialist conception of fate as abandonment. The problem with Gelven's account is that it does not directly enjoin the debate with the school of thought whose account of fate is central to its whole philosophy, namely, Stoicism. My primary goal in this paper is to show that Gelven does not adequately respond to the challenge of the genuine Stoic account of fate. Gelven fails to recognize that: (1) the Stoics do not (attempt to) justify fate, rather they *emphasize* the true significance of fate; (2) Stoicism is positively not an indifference to fate, but rather a rigorous discipline for *coping with* it by providing us with a system of thought for becoming invulnerable to the *blows* of fate on the one hand, while rationally enjoying the *blessings* of fate on the other. Moreover, I will try to show that (3) Gelven's gloss of *amorfati* is inadequate. My concluding suggestion will be that the Stoics are correct to maintain that it is our commonality in *reason* which really matters, not, as Gelven believes, our individual genetic and cultural uniqueness.

I.

As a Heidegger commentator, it is not surprising that Gelven's conception of fate is decidedly Heideggerean in flavor. He argues that "[f]ate is not external but internal to us; and the conflict of abandonment is precisely that in us between what is given or bestowed and what is earned or deserved."[2] Furthermore, on Gelven's view the confrontation of fate as abandonment contains a deeply alienating aspect:

We have discovered that to be abandoned means to suffer a diminution of worth due to the alienation of self from self, that is, myself as worthy because of my own deserving and myself as worthy because of what is bestowed. Abandonment adjusts the tuner so as to render the bestowed meaning entirely out of focus with the earned meaning, and as a consequence not only is my worth diminished but my attunement is rendered out of focus: I no longer *belong* with myself.[3]

Gelven argues that fate reveals the truth about how we are to think of our existence as fundamentally in tension between what we rightfully *deserve* as free moral agents and what we are bestowed as fated beings who are born with a *given* inheritance and receive blessings and blows in life we do not earn, choose, or deserve.

Gelven's wide-ranging use of literary sources, including everything from Milton and Sophocles to Walt Disney, makes for lively speculative argumentation, but his inquiry is incomplete. This is because he does not meet head on alternative accounts of fate which are certainly worthy of examination.[4] Gelven avoids addressing the ideas and arguments of other philosophers as a result of not directly discussing their actual texts. Moreover, when he does mention other philosophers, he refers to them only in passing. This serves to undermine his reasoning by giving the impression that he, ironically, has not acknowledged his *own* philosophical inheritance as an inquirer into fate. This is ironic because Gelven emphasizes inheritance as a crucially important aspect of fate. The principle of charity dictates that it is the philosopher's responsibility, as a fair-minded scholar, to be sufficiently accurate in his representation of other sophisticated philosophical treatments of fate. In this regard, Gelven seems to fall short of shouldering his burden of proof since he does not include references to pre-existing scholarship.

On Gelven's account, when we are visited by undeserved adversity and we groan 'why me?' in response, we are not actually demanding an *explanation* for our suffering. Instead, we are struggling to "illuminate" what it means for us to be fated beings. After taking pains to set up the context of and motivation behind this 'why me?' question in Part One of his book, Gelven proceeds in Part Two, the heart of his inquiry, to illustrate 'Four Figures' who serve as focal points for analyzing four different aspects of the central concept, fate. He examines the Gambler to elucidate fate as *chance,* the Historian to illustrate fate as the *destiny* (of a people), the Birthday Celebrant to reveal fate as (personal) *fortune,* and finally the Tragedian's art to illuminate fate not as predictability, but rather as *inevitability.* Throughout Gelven wants to explain how we can *think* about fate, even though he insists fate cannot strictly be *understood* causally or *justified* morally.

Through analysis of these four character studies he reaches the following conclusion about his central question: What does it mean that we are fated? The answer is that our worth cannot be limited to our success. It means we are beings to whom bestowals are essential for who we are. But it also means that the mere fact of undeserved suffering in no way guarantees our existential worth. Ismene is not Antigone. It means, therefore, that truth must matter. Truth, however, is that which *arrests;* it is that beyond which there

is no appeal. There can be no truth, then, unless there is the possibility of affirming that beyond which there is no appeal; and the noble endurance of the cruelties of chance, destiny, and fortune is beyond appeal. This is fate.[5]

Here Gelven does offer a valuable insight into the nature of fate, namely, that a significant and inescapable aspect of our human situation is that, "our worth cannot be limited to our success." His analyses of the 'Four Figures' bring this out quite well. Moreover, his observation that truth is arresting, in so far as it halts further inquiry, is also apt. The *problem* with this text, however, lies in the logic of the "therefore." Gelven's inference from the "fact that undeserved suffering in no way guarantees our existential worth" and "Ismene is not Antigone" to *"therefore,* truth must matter" is a *non sequitur.* Even if we grant that truth *does* matter in some general sense in this context, Gelven provides no support to his inference that truth *must* matter. This strong claim of necessity implied in the "must" simply does not follow from what he has said. Gelven fails to specify whether he is asserting a logical, a conceptual, or perhaps an *existential* necessity, whatever that might be.

Nevertheless, having set up his own account of fate as abandonment, Gelven proceeds to level his criticisms of 'The Three Justifications' of fate: nature ('the Bambi fallacy'), stoicism, and theodicy, all of which he recognizes as challenges to his existentialist account. 'The Bambi fallacy' is the idea that the individual specimen, e.g. Bambi the deer or a particular impala, is entirely replaceable from nature's point of view. Nature respects not individuals, but only whole species.[6] Gelven argues, quite convincingly, that on this view, when Bambi is mauled and devoured by the hungry leopard, the only explanation is that that is how nature is, that is simply how nature works. This is a fallacy because according to the viewpoint of nature, there is no fate at all, but merely the unacceptably deflated concept of 'bad luck.' "For fate becomes nothing other than the principle of indifference to individuals."[7] This 'Bambi Fallacy' merely reiterates abandonment, Gelven claims, offering no illumination of how to think about *this* leopard's hunger or *that* impala's terror.[8] Thus Gelven rejects nature as an attempted justification of fate.

While Gelven's analyses of 'the Bambi fallacy' and theodicy, as he reconstructs it from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Leibniz,[9] are generally fair, his polemic against "stoicism" is problematic. Gelven's choice not to capitalize "Stoicism" is indicative of how he makes the object of his criticism a mere strawman caricature. By "stoicism" Gelven probably means to refer to a sort of loose, contemporary, layperson's understanding of the philosophy which, in point of fact, bears a quite tenuous connection to genuine, ancient Stoicism. If this loose, modern notion is what he means by "stoicism", then this would be similar to contemporary (mis)understandings of "Epicurean" as "luxurious, sensual, gluttonous. . . [d]evoted to refined and sensuous enjoyment."[10] Using Epictetus as my representative, I will try to show how ancient Stoicism is not subject to the dismissive objections Gelven levels against his conception of stoicism.

First of all, Gelven makes the odd choice of a Shakespearean character, Brutus' wife Portia in *Julius Caesar,* as the target of his criticism instead of a genuine *Stoic philosopher* like Seneca, Epictetus, or Marcus Aurelius whose writings are lengthy and detailed and thus excellent sources of real Stoic thinking. Gelven attacks the stoic presupposition that "our moral worth consists in our triumph over our baser instincts."[11] He asks, "Is nobility *merely* the triumph over the baser instincts; or is a profound awe toward truth the deeper meaning to nobility? And can truth be honored if the achievement of moral worth depends on an indifference to who we are?"[12]

Gelven's stoic notions bear little resemblance to the genuine ancient Stoic doctrines. The actual Stoic position is that the good is living consistently in accordance with nature.[13] For human beings this means, according to the Stoics, living in accordance with *reason.*[14] Reason informs us that all externals, health, wealth, possessions, career, reputation, and other people are neither essentially nor completely under our control, but that our choices, decisions, judgments, and evaluations *are* by their very nature 'up to us.'[15] Since, as the Stoic reasoning goes, we are happy when we attain what we want and avoid what we consider bad, we must concentrate our efforts on keeping our choices rational (and virtuous) since *that and that alone* is always within our power. Nobility for the Stoics lies in valuing one's moral integrity above all externals and striving to perfect one's moral character by maintaining the rationality of one's judgments about the world and what happens to us.

Now this self-mastery is certainly in part "the triumph over the baser instincts" such as envy, resentment, jealousy, greed and the like, but there is nothing "mere" about achieving this moral self-sufficiency, equanimity, magnanimity, and wisdom. It entails acceptance of the fact that we are indeed fated, by our physical nature, to be vulnerable to external occurrences like physical pain, illness, poverty, the death of loved ones, etc. But at the same time we are *not* susceptible to involuntarily losing our virtue since sound, rational, judgments and moral intentions cannot be stripped away by any external misfortune. No one and nothing can force irrational, immoral judgments upon us. Thus the truth of Stoicism is that to invest one's happiness in externals by valuing externals as even remotely comparable in worth to one's virtue *necessarily* means making one's happiness dependent upon luck instead of training oneself to regard one's virtue as *sufficient* for happiness by resting secure in the unshakeability of one's rationally maintained moral integrity, autonomy, and self-sufficiency.

In effect, the Stoic lifts his true self (i.e. his power of assent or the source of his judgments, beliefs, and choices wherein he is completely free[16]) above the vicissitudes of fortune and the blows of fate in which he is doomed to lose himself by enslaving himself to the contingencies in the external world wherein he could *never* be truly free. Thus Gelven's claim that in the confrontation of fate as abandonment, "I no longer *belong* with myself,"[17] is rejected root and branch on the Stoic account since it is one's faculty of judgment, decision, evaluation, and assent which precisely constitutes one's true, enduring identity, one's real self. This Stoic self, by its very nature, is invulnerable to external vagaries, and so cannot possibly be lost. By limiting one's desires to keeping this Stoic self in accord with its rational, virtuous nature, the Stoic's happiness is ensured and his identity as a moral agent is preserved. The realm of contingency, the sphere vulnerable to fate is exclusively the world external to the Stoic self. Fate reminds us that we can be self-possessed only by affirming these Stoic judgments.

Gelven insists that "my *ability* to be victimized by random events is a necessary condition of who I am."[18] But the Stoics directly challenge the idea that external events have the power to victimize us *regardless of what we think and do*. Gelven rejects stoicism since it attempts to justify fate when Gelven insists that the very meaning of fate defies justification. However, the Stoics do *not,* in fact, attempt to justify fate as theodicy does. Rather, the Stoics simply give up the game of wanting to *control* externals since that is a game they are fated to lose. Instead, the Stoics concentrate on perfecting their 'internals', i.e. virtuous, rational judgments, since that is the game they *can* win. The Stoic trains himself to live by Stoic doctrines, constantly applying the tenets of Stoic ethics to his daily circumstances precisely in order to make himself immune, or rather increasingly *more* immune, to victimization by the contingency of external events. By containing his desires to keeping his judgments, decisions, and intentions according to nature, the Stoic refuses to invest his happiness in external contingencies. For the Stoic, the tragic figure is the one who suffers misfortune the only way one can: by victimizing *oneself* by forgetting to limit concern to that which is 'up to oneself' or under one's own control. To expect to derive happiness from possession of externals, whether they be material objects, fame, friends, or family, is to deceive oneself about the necessary insecurity of all externals. Thus, far from being indifferent to fate, exactly because of the nature of externals being subject to fate, the Stoic philosophy is a rigorous discipline designed to enable us to accept the adversities in the external world we cannot change, and to enjoy the blessings we receive from the external world without coming to make our happiness depend upon those occasional external gifts of fate.

II.

After his treatment of stoicism, the second weakness of Gelven's account of fate is his puzzling description of *amor fati.* Gelven writes:

In contrast to the view of *carpe diem is* the opposing image in which one savors what is bestowed; this view is often characterized as *amor fati.* If one is so busy using time, it is argued, one will not allow time to bestow anything on us. If I seize every moment I forfeit the ability of the moment to seize me. The first urges us, "Don't just sit there, *do* something!" The second urges us, "Don't just *do* something, sit there! "[19] This depiction of *amor fati is* oversimplified, since the love of fate need not in the least de-emphasize taking active initiative in living, and it is a caricature of such powerfully and subtly articulated doctrines of *amor fati* as are found in thinkers like Nietzsche[20] and the ancient Stoics.

For the Stoics, fate can be loved because unanticipated occurrences in the world are simply part of its rational, intelligible nature. Again turning to Epictetus, the cosmos as a whole is rationally organized, so seemingly random events are in fact understandable results of the complex causal nexus constitutive of the natural world: "to the rational being only the irrational is unendurable, but the rational is endurable."[21] The Stoic's *amor fati is* thus a love of *reason* coupled with belief in the providentially rational organization of the world.[22] The Stoic sage has convinced himself that whatever happens to him can be put to good use. Putative adversities can be seen as opportunities to exercise his virtues of patience, perseverance, fortitude, forbearance, and magnanimity.[23] Far from "just sitting there", the Stoic tries to act in accordance with (his human) nature by forming rational, virtuous judgments and doing his best to act in accordance with them. Since the *consequences* of his intended actions lie beyond his control in the external world, however, he is prepared to accept whatever the outcome may be.[24] It is not in his power to conform worldly events to his will, but it is in his power to conform his own will to worldly events by coping with them without resentment and making the best of them. Since the Stoic can, by rigorously training the faculties given to him by *nature,* achieve this mental freedom and power of rational judgment, he can indeed love his *fate.*[25] Gelven's characterization of *amor fati* as total passivity is therefore a caricature when viewed from the Stoic perspective, and so ultimately an inadequate account of this rich concept.

III.

The third major problem with Gelven's inquiry arises from his claim in Chapter Nine that we humans, and we alone, matter, and matter absolutely, because of our inheritance. "I matter because of my inheritance. I am born American, male, white, left-handed, and so on. As such I inherit certain physical qualities as well as values and traditions. These matter independently of an agent who cares, so they too are

absolute, not contingent."[26] This last inference is doubly dubious. First, it is not evident why *only* humans matter because of their unique set of inherited traits. Second, it is not evident why humans matter "absolutely" because of these traits.

Why would the fact of being born American, male, white, left-handed, inheriting certain physical qualities, values and traditions matter "absolutely"? If it is my sheer *uniqueness* that distinguishes me as mattering "absolutely", then not only does every *who* matter "absolutely" as Gelven contends, but non-persons like the unlucky impala as *whats* matter "absolutely" as well due to *their* uniqueness. Every frog, dog, impala, and elephant specimen is at the very least genetically unique. Gelven denies that the impala has a fate since she is understood solely as a creature in nature who cannot ask 'why me?' But Elsa the lioness, for example, surely had a unique story despite the fact that as a lioness she herself could not tell it or roar 'why me?'. So Gelven falls short of establishing why humans *exclusively* have unique stories that matter.

In short, Gelven too hastily begs the question against ancient Stoicism by characterizing the Stoic sage's hard-won mental serenity which results from recognizing and cherishing his moral invulnerability as "an artificially induced indifference to our vulnerability to fate."[27] To put it differently, for the Stoic we are luckily fated to be rational, and therein lies our salvation. The Stoics thus neither justify nor deny fate, but rather they deny that we must necessarily make our well-being *vulnerable* to fate. Far from being apathetic or indifferent to fate, fate is a constant reminder to the Stoics that externals are, by their inviolable nature, contingent and essentially beyond our control.

The dispute between Gelven's existentialist view and the Stoic view of fate is ultimately a dispute over the nature of the world and human nature. As Gelven observes, "for this [his own] argument to be persuasive, one must first assume that we do not accept being deceived about who we are."[28] Gelven praises the Tragedian for not trying to justify fate but simply illuminating it as necessarily tragic when catastrophes afflict heroes. The Stoic response to fate is precisely to fault the tragedian for assuming that catastrophes happen *to us* and not seeing that we set *ourselves up* for disaster by clinging to false beliefs and dangerous value judgments.

Epictetus observes:

For what are tragedies but the portrayal in tragic verse of the sufferings of human beings who have admired external things? If indeed one had to be deceived into learning that among things external and independent of our free choice none concerns us, I, for my part, should consent to a deception which would result in my living thereafter serenely and without turmoil; but as for you, you will yourselves see to your own preference.[29]

Here the idea is certainly not that one must deceive oneself to be a Stoic, but rather that one would have to have no interest in peace of mind and being self-sufficient with respect to one's own happiness *not* to want the fruits of holding Stoic beliefs. Thus from the Stoic perspective it is *Gelven* who deceives himself about the nature of the world and human nature. As for the latter, to emphasize that it is our genetic and cultural *differences* which matter ("absolutely"?) is not only philosophically exaggerated, but could be politically divisive since it would serve to fragment society into discordant genetic, racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. Instead, the Stoics recognized that it is our commonality in *reason* which makes it possible for us to live together harmoniously as equal members of the same rational community. This Stoic conception would provide for political solidarity that transcends genetic and cultural diversity.

One could object that the Stoic solution seeks to dissolve our genetically inherited uniqueness in the reagent of this universal and common rationality, thereby destroying each person's individuality altogether.[30] But each person would indeed retain their individuality in so far as each person's real (Stoic) self includes his or her specific set of beliefs, judgments, valuations, and talents. Thus even a group of Stoic sages would not share all of the same aesthetic judgments about films, music, poetry, painting, etc. Even more importantly, each individual is also uniquely defined by their own set of social, civic, professional, and familial duties which arise from their web of relationships with others and the resulting roles which are incumbent upon them because of their *special* personal and biographical circumstances. Thus to emphasize our commonality in reason as the very pre-condition of human solidarity, societal co-operation, and symbiosis neither requires, nor leads to, the loss of individuality.

Rather, with respect to the nature of the world, the Stoics simply recognized that externals are by their very nature contingent, always susceptible to loss and destruction, and so utterly insecure. On the other hand, complete security can be found in the freedom of one's Stoic self since it is immune to the blows of fate which all non-Stoics doom themselves to suffer. By forgetting the contingency of all externals and nonetheless choosing to invest significant value, and consequently their hope and happiness, in those externals, non-Stoics victimize themselves.[31]

ENDNOTES

1. Why me? A philosophical inquiry into fate, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1991.

2. Ibid., p. 129.

3. Ibid., p. 131; his emphasis.

4. Gelven disdains the scholarly convention of footnotes entirely.

5. Gelven, *Why me?,* p.ll4; his emphasis.

6.Ibid.,p.133.

7. Ibid., p. 137.
8. Ibid.
9. Gelven attacks Leibniz's account of theodicy, just as he does other philosophical views throughout his book, without bothering to give any textual references to the philosopher's specific essays.
10. *Oxford English Dictionary,* vol. IV, 238.
11. Gelven, *Why me ?, p.* 140.
12. Ibid., p. 141; his emphasis.
13. Epictetus' *Discourses* I.6.21 and ff.
14. Epictetus' *Discourses* I.3 and ff.
15. Epictetus' *Encheiridion I.* 1-2 and ff.
16. Epictetus' *Discourses* I.6.40 and ff.
17. Gelven, *Why me ?, p.* 131.
18. Ibid., p. 176; his emphasis.
19. Ibid., p. 187; his emphasis.
20. See *Die Frohliche Wissenschaft* §341 and Nietzsche's other scattered remarks about the eternal recurrence and *amor fati.*
21. Epictetus' *Discourses,* I.2.1.
22. Perhaps this Stoic *explanation* of the cosmos and the role of fate within it is what Gelven has in mind when he speaks of the Stoic *justification* of fate. But it seems to me that this Stoic conception of the cosmos does not attempt to render fate benign in any normative sense, that is, it does not try to *justify* it. Rather, the Stoic account incorporates the notion of fate into a description of what properly belongs to our moral life. The Stoic account of the cosmos provides the background against which our moral life is made intelligible. In this sense, the Stoic treatment (explanation) of fate is different from the treatments of fate offered by what Gelven characterizes as the other two "justifications" of fate, namely, theodicy and the Bambi fallacy.
23. Epictetus' *Discourses* III.20.9-15.
24. Epictetus' *Discourses* I.1.17, IV.3.11 and elsewhere.
25. The Stoics would, I think, agree with Herakleitos' maxim: (a person's character is his fate).
26. Gelven, *Why me ?, p.* 159.
27. Ibid., p. 141.
28. Ibid., p. 160.
29. Epictetus' *Discourses* I.4.26-27; I follow W. A. Oldfather's translation, Harvard University Press, 1979, Vol. I, p. 35.
30. I am grateful to Prof. Manuel M. Davenport of Texas A & M University for this suggestion.
31. Cf. note #18 above.

PHILOSOPHY: THREE CREDITS WORTH OF MEANING

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INTRODUCTION

When the novelist, Kurt Vonnegut, spoke at the dedication of a university library recently, he reflected upon the milestone quality of the occasion for him. "I was born only yesterday," he said, moments before daybreak--and yet this afternoon I am fifty-four years old. I am a mere baby and yet here I am dedicating a library." The point of his remarks was that life slips by almost unnoticed until suddenly one is looking at middle age. As I read Vonnegut's talk, I wondered how many members of the student audience had caught the implication that in retrospect one can wonder to what extent one has lived a meaningful life.

There is a lot of lip-service given to meaningfulness especially by psychologists who want to cash in on the lucrative market of self-help books, but somehow the philosophers seem to have been pushed out of the picture. I think that this is especially evident in the waning enrollment in philosophy classes in colleges and universities. I think that this is a pity, because the arena in which philosophy should be touching the lives of people is precisely the college classroom. After all at any given moment the largest percentage of people doing philosophy are college students. Furthermore, most of them expect philosophy to benefit their lives in some meaningful way, even if it is only three credits worth. So today I would like to localize my remarks within the context of teaching philosophy to today's college students. I would like to ask and respond to three questions: (1) In what sense and to what extent is the doing of philosophy a search for meaning?