Causation and Responsibility in Plato and the Hellenistic Philosophy

Statement of proposed research

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1. Topics to be studied

My main research focuses on the reconstruction and analysis of the debate about causation and responsibility initiated by Plato and continued by the Hellenistic philosophers. The three main topics I am interested are:

1. The competing conceptions of causation and responsibility discussed in Plato’s dialogues (how they differ, what are their advantages and limitations, what are their formal characteristics, what puzzles they raise, and how they relate to human agency).
2. The interrelation amongst causation, ontology, the method of inquiry, epistemology, and ethics (what are the presuppositions of the arguments about causation, what are the implications for these other areas).
3. The Platonic origin of Hellenistic theories of causation (are they critically engaging with Plato, rejecting him, merely appropriating or borrowing certain concepts?)

2. Current and proposed research

As part of my visiting postdoctoral research at Oxford, I am preparing a book manuscript on causation and responsibility in Plato and the Stoics. In this monograph, I offer new interpretations of key passages in Plato and the Stoics to argue that the latter engaged in a complex and sophisticated way with Plato’s dialogues. The dialogues I discuss at length are the Phaedo, Republic 6, Parmenides, and Sophist, and the chapters on the Stoics include the views of Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus. The manuscript has two parts. In the first one, I discuss various models of causation and responsibility in

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1 Let me be more precise. Ancient philosophers use a wide range of locutions to express what I call 'causation and responsibility.' This includes: (1) the adjective ἁρμός, used with genitive, or as a noun in neuter (ἁρμόνιον), (2) the noun ἁρμία, (3) the verb ἁρμάζω, (4) δία + accusative, (5) causal or instrumental dative, (6) the verb ζωή, (7) ἐνέκα, and (8) δία τι, and δί τι. The translation into English of some of these locutions is problematic. First, because it is almost impossible to find translations that work well for all the passages, and because any available word in English is loaded with philosophical baggage, and could give the impression that one is begging the question about how to understand these terms. The semantic field of ἁρμία, for example, includes 'responsibility,' 'guilt,' 'blame,' 'fault,' 'accusation,' but also 'cause.' In some contexts, other suggestions include, 'reason,' 'explanation,' 'mode of explanation,' 'causation,' and 'causal account.' The adjective ἁρμός, -ος in turn, means 'culpable,' 'responsible,' but used with the genitive means 'responsible for,' and accompanied by an article means 'the accused,' 'culprit,' 'cause,' or 'the thing responsible.' See Sedley (1998, 115). See also, Frede (1980), and Hankinson (1998). From an etymological point of view, Beekes (2010) explains that ἁρμός, ἁρμία and ἁρμέω were derived from ἁρμίας "share" (see ἁρμύμιος, ἁρμίδω). Although these two terms are not identical, they are at times also interchangeable. As it can be seen, in both cases parts of the semantic field implies an evaluative aspect (responsibility, guilt, culpable), while other parts sound more objective (cause). Notice that it also has an epistemological aspect (explanation, causal account).
Plato, some puzzles and difficulties that derive from each of these models, and some of the tentative solutions he offers to solve them. In the second section, I discuss how the Stoics engaged with Plato's philosophy and how they responded to the puzzles and solutions offered by him. My interpretation rejects a traditional portrayal of the Stoics as anti-Platonic and the recent suggestion that they were not interested in Plato's philosophical project. My analysis shows, in contrast, that the Stoics were not hostile but careful readers of Plato and his dialogues and conceived philosophy in an organic and interconnected way similar to Plato's. The overall aim is to show how the Stoics discussion on causality can be better understood as a critical continuation of Plato's proposals.

This monograph is a revised and much-improved version of my doctoral dissertation. Parts of this research have been presented in London, New York, Mexico City, Cambridge, and Oxford. One of the chapters is accepted for its publication in the Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, as a stand-alone piece. A second chapter is also under consideration in the British Journal for the History of Philosophy. Manuscripts of these papers and drafts of four other chapters are available on request. I am currently writing an additional chapter on causation in Plato’s Philebus and Timaeus. As part of the preparation for this chapter, I will present a translation and commentary of the relevant passage of the Philebus in a seminar at University College, Oxford in November 2015. I will have a book proposal and full manuscript ready for submission to academic presses by September 2016. I think that the project Theories of causality and human agency in ancient Greek philosophy offers me an excellent environment to work in the final stages of this project, and to be able to produce a final version of the highest academic standards.

After the submission of the book proposal, I will focus on publishing other papers that stem from the same research project but that are detailed and specialized discussions on specific topics that are not fully discussed in the book manuscript. The first of these pieces is on Plato’s Phaedo. The working title is “Atlas and the δεύτερος πλοῦς in Plato’s Phaedo 99b6-d2.” This paper will offer a new reading of Plato’s Phaedo 99b6-d2. My claim is that, contrary to a widespread interpretation, this passage does not offer any evidence for the claim that Socrates abandons the teleological αἰτία. This paper will be submitted for publication by the end of 2016.

A second paper focuses on Plato’s Statesman. The working title is “Backward causation in Plato’s Statesman 268d-274e.” This paper is a collaborative piece with Saloni de Souza (Oxford). Our aim is to clarify the types of causation at play in this passage and compare it and distinguish it from what is found in other Platonic dialogues, especially the Timaeus. At the same time, I will also be working on another paper entitled “Causation and moral responsibility in Plato’s Laws 9, 860-866.” The main aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between causality, responsibility and the voluntariness of actions. These papers will be ready for submission before the beginning of 2017.

During 2017, I plan to work on a paper discussing the Stoic reception of Plato’s Cratylus 413a1-7. The main text I will be looking at for the Stoics is Stobaeus, Eclogae

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2 See, for instance, Schofield (1999) and Vogt (2009), Sellars (2010).
3 See, for instance, Vlastos (1969), Bostock (1986), and Sedley (1998).
4 For the discussion on this topic, see, for example, Mohr (1978), Rosen (1979), and Carone (2004).
5 For previous work on this topic, see O'Brien (1957), Mackenzie (1981), Roberts (1987), and Smith Pangle (2009).
Physicae et Ethicae 1.138, 14-139, 8 (SVF1.89; 2.336; LS55A; FDS 762). The main aim of the paper is to propose that Zeno and Chrysippus developed two different conceptions of causation that stem from Plato’s Cratylus. The purpose of the paper is to reconstruct in detail the debate between Plato and these two Stoics. A second paper I plan to write during this year will discuss causal relations, causal relata and the principle of sufficient reason in Hippias Major 296e-297c, and how it compares to Philebus 26e-27a, and other passages in the Republic. Then, I will begin working on the causation of self-movers in Phaedrus 245c2-246a4. I plan to have a paper discussing this passage and its relation to later philosophy by the end of 2017. Afterwards, I will be working on a piece on puzzles about motivation and human agency in Alcibiades I. The plan is to have a full draft ready for submission by March 2018.

3. Research schedule and list of expected publications

The following schedule shows the dates of submission to academic journals, and the expected date of publication of my research for the next two years. Titles are provisional. I am estimating a year between the date of submission and the final date of publication for all my work, based on previous experience.

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References

6 On the Stoic reception of the Cratylus more generally, see Ademollo (2011) and (2012).