

# Causation and Responsibility in Plato and the Hellenistic Philosophy

## Statement of proposed research

Dr Daniel Vázquez

### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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

---

<sup>1</sup> 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 αἴτιος, used with genitive, or as a noun in neuter (αἴτιον), (2) the noun αἰτία, (3) the verb αἰτιάομαι, (4) διὰ + accusative, (5) causal or instrumental dative, (6) the verb ποιεῖν, (7) ἕνεκα, and (8) διὰ τί, and δι' ὅτι. 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 αἰτία, 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 αἴτιος, -ov 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 αἴτιος, αἰτία and αἰτέω were derived from \*αἴτος "share" (see → αἴνυμαι, → αἰτέω). Although these two terms are not identical, they are at times also interchangeable. As it can be seen, in both cases part 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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*.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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*

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Schofield (1999) and Vogt (2009), Sellars (2010).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Vlastos (1969), Bostock (1986), and Sedley (1998).

<sup>4</sup> For the discussion on this topic, see, for example, Mohr (1978), Rosen (1979), and Carone (2004).

<sup>5</sup> 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*.<sup>6</sup> 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.

No.	Expected publications	Sept. 2016	Dec. 2016	June 2017	Dec. 2017	March 2018
1.	<i>Causation and responsibility in Plato and the Stoics</i> (book ms.).	X				
2.	"Atlas and the δεύτερος πλοῦς in Plato's <i>Phaedo</i> 99b6-d2."		X			
3.	"Backward causation in Plato's <i>Statesman</i> 268d-274e."		X			
4.	"Causation and moral responsibility in Plato's <i>Laws</i> 9, 860-866."			X		
5.	"The Stoic reception of Plato's <i>Cratylus</i> 413a1-7"			X		
6.	"Causal relations, causal relata, and the principle of sufficient reason in <i>Hippias Major</i> 296e-297c."				X	
7.	"Puzzles about motivation and human agency in Plato's <i>Alcibiades</i> I"					X

### References

<sup>6</sup> On the Stoic reception of the *Cratylus* more generally, see Ademollo (2011) and (2012).

- Ademollo, Francesco. 2011. *The Cratylus of Plato. A Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ———. 2012. "The Platonic Origins of Stoic Theology." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 43: 217–243.
- Beekes, Robert, and Lucien Van Beek. 2010. *Etymological Dictionary of Greek, 2 Vols.* Vol. 10. Leiden: Brill.
- Bostock, David. 1986. *Plato's Phaedo*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carone, Gabriela Roxana. 2004. "Reversing the Myth of the *Politicus*." *Classical Quarterly* 54 (1): 88–108.
- Frede, Michael. 1980. "The Original Notion of Cause." In *Doubt and Dogmatism*, edited by Malcolm Schofield, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hankinson, R.J. J. 1998. *Cause and Explanation in Ancient Greek Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mackenzie, Mary Margaret. 1981. *Plato on Punishment*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Mohr, Richard. 1978. "The Formation of the Cosmos in the *Statesman* Myth." *Phoenix* 32 (3): 250–252.
- O'Brien, Michael. 1957. "Plato and the 'Good Conscience': *Laws* 863e5–864b7." *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 88: 81–87.
- Roberts, Jean. 1987. "Plato On The Causes Of Wrongdoing In The *Laws*." *Ancient Philosophy* 7: 23–37.
- Rosen, Stanley. 1979. "Plato's Myth of the Reversed Cosmos." *The Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1): 59–85.
- Schofield, Malcolm. 1999. "Social and Political Thought." In *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, edited by Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Mansfeld Jaap, and Malcolm Schofield. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sedley, David. 1998. "Platonic Causes." *Phronesis* 43 (2) (July): 114–132.
- Sellars, John. 2010. "Stoic Ontology and Plato's *Sophist*." In *Aristotle and the Stoics Reading Plato, Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, Suppl. 107*, edited by V. Harte, M.M. McCabe, R.W. Sharples, and A. Sheppard, 3:185–203.
- Smith Pangle, Lorraine. 2009. "Moral and Criminal Responsibility in Plato's *Laws*." *American Political Science Review* 103 (3): 456–473.
- Vlastos, Gregory. 1969. "Reasons and Causes in the *Phaedo*." *The Philosophical Review* 78 (3): 291–325.
- Vogt, Katja Maria. 2009. "Sons of the Earth: Are the Stoics Metaphysical Brutes?" *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy* 54 (2) (April): 136–154.