

Diogenes of Oinoanda And the Timing of Causes

Post by “Cassius” of October 11, 2022 at 10:51 PM

We are considering the possibility of including this [fragment](#) in the podcast discussion for this week, but it's a difficult one and we need to call for public input. Diogenes argues that this error of the Stoics "more than any other" leads them astray. But I confess this one gets past me, so let's discuss if we can: What is the issue being discussed here?

[Quote from Diogenes of Oinoanda](#)

Fr. 33

Well now, I want to deflect also the error that, along with the feeling of self-love, has you in its grip —an error that, more than any other, further inflates your doctrine as ignorant. The error is this: [not] all causes in things precede their effects, even if the majority do, but some of them precede their effects, others [coincide with] them, and others follow them.

Examples of causes that precede are cautery and surgery saving life: in these cases extreme pain must be borne, and it is after this that pleasure quickly follows.

Examples of coincident causes are [solid] and liquid nourishment and, in addition to these, [sexual acts:] we do not eat [food] and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we drink wine and experience pleasure afterwards, nor do we emit semen and experience pleasure afterwards; rather the action brings about these pleasures for us immediately, without awaiting the future.

[As for causes that follow, an example is expecting] to win praise after death: although men experience pleasure now because there will be a favourable memory of them after they have gone, nevertheless the cause of the pleasure occurs later.

Now you, being unable to mark off these distinctions, and being unaware that the virtues have a place among the causes that coincide with their effects (for they are borne along with [pleasure]), go completely astray.]

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Whether it is the translation or something else, there is something missing here. I presume that there is a logic controversy of some kind with the Stoics that is probably also being hidden by loose wording or translators who don't understand the issue and so misstate it. Also when I say logic controversy I mean more of an inside baseball stoic technical argument that we don't recognize than a generic logic issue.

I give Diogenes the benefit of the doubt that he was not talking nonsense or in riddles, but in all honesty I can't figure out the point being made here.

Is anyone aware of any articles on this topic or other explanations for what is being discussed here?

Maybe the word being translated as "causes" has some more subtle meaning? "Motivation" perhaps? That suggestion doesn't seem to be good enough to address the issue. Why were the Stoics even concerned about the timing of causes? And why would the Epicureans have been interested in debating this issue?

Were the Stoics carrying over this argument as to timing of causes from their physics arguments that the universe must have a divine origin / starting point? Perhaps arguing that all "results" (things we observe) must come from prior causes, as an argument against the eternal universe theory (of the Epicureans)?

The issue seems to go to the issue of the nature of virtue and why someone would pursue it, but if there was a Stoic argument about timing that is relevant I am not sure what it is.