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Research Statement: Stoic lekta & Rationality

A controversial aspect of my dissertation, “The Coherence of Stoic Ontology,” is the account I give of Stoic Sayables, or *lekta* (roughly, the meanings of our words). Though it is undisputed that the Stoics classify these novel semantic entities as *incorporeal*, few agree on what the label amounts to. My dissertation establishes that *lekta*, like the other incorporeals (time, place and void), are best considered *body-less*: entities that depend on bodies without themselves being bodies, much as the flow of traffic depends on cars without being identical to the cars. The bodies that give rise to *lekta* are rational impressions (*logikai phantasiai*), or thoughts; and what they give rise to is the content of our thoughts that can be expressed in words. Taking these Sayables to be mind-dependent as this interpretation does, immediately raises questions as to how they can be sufficiently objective to be what’s shared in communication, what is true or false and what we call facts about the world.

Indeed, many commentators have assumed that no mental entity could do such heavy lifting. Others stand by the strong textual evidence that favors mind-dependence, but have no satisfactory account of their objectivity. This lack of consensus about the mind-dependence of *lekta* is symptomatic of underdeveloped foundational issues rather than a mature debate. I address the first of these in my dissertation, establishing how, as a piece of metaphysics, products of thought (mental entities) could have the requisite objectivity to do the job they are meant for. The next step—the flesh to these bones, as the Stoics would say—is a matter of human psychology, and therefore of rationality. My research project is to give an account of Stoic *lekta* (again, the meanings of our words) from the inside out, so to speak. How else can we get an adequate grip on what it amounts to for *lekta* to be mind-dependent?

Front and center to the investigation are the rational impressions from which *lekta* inherit their objective content. There are two aspects to an analysis of the rational impression: what makes it rational, and its characteristics as an impression. The first requires an account of sense-perception and concept formation, which for the Stoics (in a move reminiscent of modern empiricists) is constitutive of our very ability to reason about the world. The rationality of the *rational* impression, the fact that our sense experience is mediated by concepts, is what makes the content propositional and *eo ipso* fit to be the meanings of our words. Just how this happens and whether the Stoics are best compared to the British empiricists is a matter of some controversy to be addressed.

The second aspect of the rational impression to consider is that an *impression* in a staunchly physicalist system like the Stoics’ is itself corporeal and causally connected with the material world. The corporeality of the mind, underappreciated by commentators on Seneca and Epictetus, grounds the content of rational impressions in our causal interactions with the world. Therefore, I suggest, the objectivity of the content required for the *lekta* to do their dialectical duties is secured already by the content of the rational impressions on which they depend. Grounding the propositional content of our rational impressions (i.e., *lekta*) in the outside world as the Stoics do is strongly reminiscent of contemporary externalist views in the philosophy mind. Both the details of this account, and the broader accuracy of the comparison of the Stoics to the British empiricists, are matters of some controversy that I plan to address.

Finally, an inquiry into *lekta* brings rationality with it because the Stoics take *lekta* to be the objects of assent and impulse—what leads a person to do something; thus they are central to a theory of action and responsibility. Indeed, the Stoics’ stance on rationality is deeply Socratic in holding that only judgments or beliefs can motivate action. Since *lekta* play such an important role as what we assent to and therefore act on, their role as motivators must inform the debate over their mind-dependence; in fact, this causal role is a big hurdle for the externalist about mental content. A parallel account applies to *lekta* in their role as objects of knowledge (the true): since knowledge is itself a form of assent, mind-dependence is not only compatible with but required for *lekta* to do their dialectical duties. From the inside out, *lekta* are both mind-dependent and objective.