

Please cite as follows:

Shea, Brendan. 2022. "Let it Go? Elsa, Stoicism, and the 'Lazy Argument'." In: W. Irwin (ed.). *AndPhilosophy.com: The Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture Series*.
<https://andphilosophy.com/2022/05/07/let-it-go-elsa-stoicism-and-the-lazy-argument/>

Let it Go? Elsa, Stoicism, and the “Lazy Argument”

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Disney's *Frozen* (2013) and *Frozen 2* (2019) are among the highest-grossing films of all time (IMDb 2021) and are arguably among the most influential works of fantasy produced in the last decade in any medium. The films, based loosely on Hans Christensen Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (Andersen 2014) focus on the adventures of the sisters Anna and Elsa as they, together with their companions, seek to safeguard their people both from external threats and (importantly) from Elsa's inability to control her magical abilities to summon ice and snow. While Anna's choices drive much of the action of both films, Elsa has undoubtedly been the more influential and popular of the two characters, as indicated by measures such as merchandise sales (Ellen Byron and Paul Ziobro 2014), Google search data (Play Like Mum 2020), and even baby name choices (Wolfers 2015).

Despite her popularity, Elsa is in many ways a paradoxical sort of hero, as she finds her actions all but predetermined by both external and internal forces. This is particularly the case in the first film, where we meet an Elsa who has been born with a power she cannot control, and which appears more as a force of nature than as anything that "belongs" to Elsa. The film's action is driven, in large part, precisely by Elsa's failures to exert control over her emotions and abilities. She begins the film by accidentally injuring Anna. This, in turn, causes Elsa to become fearful and withdrawn and to isolate herself from her sister, even after their parents die on a quest to find a cure for Elsa. Elsa's fear and lack of control lead to an even more dire outcome when she inadvertently calls down winter on Arendelle and abandons her people for the mountains. It is only through Anna's devoted quest to rescue her sister, first by pursuing her to the mountains, and later by throwing herself in front of the villainous Hans' sword attack on her sister, that Elsa (and Arendelle) are saved. Elsa's most active contribution to this is to appreciate the import of Anna's sacrifice and to discover the power of "love" to overcome her fear.

What then, are we to make of Elsa as a character? It is the younger sister Anna who corresponds most closely to Gerda, the unquestioned protagonist of Andersen's original tale, and her character arc fits neatly with the well-known "Hero's Journey" model for describing myth (Campbell 2020). It is Anna, for example, who goes on a quest, meets a group of motley companions (the human Kristoff, the reindeer Sven, and the magical snowman Olaf), accepts advice from wise elders (the trolls), undergoes a severe trial, and even gets the "reward" of romantic love at the end. All of this has led some scholars (Niemiec and Bretherton 2015; Heit 2019) to hold up Anna, rather than Elsa, as something like the hero of the story. Existing scholarship on Elsa, by contrast, has focused largely on issues related to her gender and sexuality (Law 2014; Lee 2015; Steinhoff 2017; Streiff and Dundes 2017; Dundes, Streiff, and Streiff 2018; Dundes 2020; Llompарт and Brugué 2020).

In what follows, I'll be taking a closer look at Elsa's unique status as a protagonist, and what her struggles with fate reveal about the nature of free will and ethical responsibility. I'll argue that Elsa provides a useful model of a "Stoic hero" and that her strengths and weaknesses as a character provide valuable insight into an

often-misunderstood school of philosophy. My argument will proceed in several stages. I'll begin by describing the basic tenets of Stoic philosophy, paying special attention to the role of *fate* and *nature*. I'll then move on to a more detailed treatment of Stoic ethics, as exemplified by Elsa's own character development. I'll close by considering the infamous "Lazy Argument" against the Stoic conception of fate and argue that Elsa helps provide a response to this. Finally, I'll briefly consider the relevance of the argument here for ongoing debates about both the *Frozen* movies and Stoic thought.

1 ELSA'S EMOTIONS AND THE FAILURES OF "COMMONSENSE" STOICISM

A few minutes into *Frozen*, we see a young Elsa accidentally injure her baby sister Anna with her magical powers while the two of them are playing. The sisters' parents seek out the trolls to help with Anna's injury. Grand Pabbie, a troll leader, warns both the parents and Elsa that she needs to keep control of her powers, and that "fear" will be her enemy in her quest to do so. In response to all of this, Elsa (apparently under her parents' directions) all but withdraws from the world, shutting herself off even from her sister Anna. As Elsa herself will later put it (in the song "Let it Go") she has been told to "conceal, don't feel," and it indeed seems to be the case that young Elsa's powers are inadvertently and involuntarily triggered by strong emotions, such as when she hears of her parents' death, discovers that Anna has agreed to marry someone she has just met, or learns for the first time of the doom that her powers have brought upon Arendelle.

Elsa's early strategies for dealing with the hand that fate has dealt her—marked by isolation from loved ones, withdrawal from the activities of life, and an overt focus on suppressing the expression of negative emotions—has close links with an idea that might be called *commonsense stoicism*. This is the idea expressed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of *stoic* as "one who practices repression of emotion, indifference to pleasure or pain, and patient endurance" ("**Stoic**, n" 2021). This sense of *stoicism*—arguably the dominant one in everyday discourse—is tightly linked to the claim that one should (or shouldn't) behave "stoically" in the face of danger or misfortune. It is, among other things, associated with an almost monomaniacal focus on negative emotions, and on their control and suppression.

Certain Stoic aphorisms (of the sort often quoted in the Stoic-inspired "self-help" books) also seem to lend support to Elsa's early choices, and commonsense Stoicism more generally. For example, consider Epictetus' famous admonition:

Let death and exile and everything that is terrible appear before your eyes every day, especially death; and you will never have anything contemptible in your thoughts or crave anything excessively.
(Epictetus 1983, sec. 21)

Taken in isolation, this seems an outright endorsement of young Elsa's way of living and thinking. Indeed, considerations of death and injury (of the sort that might be caused by her powers) and of (self-chosen) exile determine much of Elsa's early behavior.

In the end, of course, Elsa's strategies for controlling her emotions in this way are revealed to be not only useless, but counterproductive, as her fear and isolation mutually reinforce each other, leading eventually to her freezing of Arendelle, her flight into the mountains, and the disasters that follow this. She is acutely aware of what she sees as her "fate" and seems to conceive of herself primarily as a threat to others, who can only be saved if she somehow removes herself from their lives. Elsa's failures here have important real-world analogs; for example, some psychological research (Murray et al. 2008; Moore et al. 2013) has linked this sort of "stoicism" to poor physical or mental health outcomes. In Elsa's case, she begins to make progress only when she self-consciously *rejects* these sorts of strategies, for example, by allowing herself to fully

experience her love for her sister Anna (which both literally and figuratively “melts a frozen heart”), and by embracing whole-heartedly her roles first as a queen and as later an intermediary with nature itself.

In the light of all of this, it might well be asked: “What could Stoicism possibly have to offer Elsa, or indeed any of us? Doesn't her story reveal the *shortcomings* of Stoicism, rather than its strengths?” Answering this question will require taking a step back and considering in more detail the ideas and claims of Stoic philosophers, before returning to the question of Elsa's attempts to grapple with her fate. As it turns out, the Stoic attitude toward both fate and the appropriate response to it is considerably more nuanced than “conceal, don't feel” and can only be understood against the larger backdrop of their larger philosophical project. It is to this background we now turn.

2 ARENDELLE AS A STOIC WORLD

Stoicism was first developed in Athens around 300 BCE, or about a generation after Aristotle's death. While many of the earliest Stoic writings have been lost, Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Philosophers* tells us that Stoicism was originally founded by Zeno of Citium and that subsequent heads of the school included Cleanthes and Chrysippus, who first formulated much of what we know think of as Stoicism (Diogenes Laertius 7.1-38, 160-89)ⁱ. Chrysippus' Stoicism would go on to become a highly successful philosophy, both within the Greek-speaking “Hellenistic” world and (eventually) within the Roman Republic and Empire. Later Roman Stoics such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius would apply and expand upon Stoic ideas, with particular attention to their application to the problems of everyday life. Both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, like the fictional Elsa and Anna, held positions of considerable political power (as emperor, Marcus Aurelius is without question the most politically powerful philosopher in history), and they wrestled in part with the question of how to deal with the often-undesirable consequences of this power, and with the severe constraints it places on personal freedom.

Like the other schools of Hellenistic philosophy that emerged around the same time, Stoicism was influenced by the earlier works of both Aristotle and Plato, and by accounts of the life and death of Socrates (who had been executed in 399 BCE). They agreed with these earlier thinkers that the ultimate goal of philosophy—and of life itself!—was to achieve *wisdom*, broadly conceived. Achieving this sort of wisdom, however, required more than simply memorizing a list of self-help rules in the way that popular discussions of Stoicism sometimes seem to suggest. Instead, it required thinking carefully about the capacities and limits of human knowledge (*logic*), the nature of the world that this knowledge was “about” (*physics*), and the sort of behavior that would be appropriate for a truly knowledgeable “sage” (*ethics*). These three branches of philosophy—logic, physics, and ethics—were seen as being related in the same way as the parts of the animal are related to the whole, with logic being the bones of the animal, and ethics and physics serving as the flesh and soul (Diogenes Laertius 7.40; Sextus Empiricus M7.19).

According to this conception of Stoicism, young Elsa's efforts to control her unruly emotions and powers, then, are doomed to failure precisely because she lacks the sort of knowledge (of both world and self) that would make genuine self-control possible in the first place. To achieve a more authentic, Stoic control of one's emotions instead requires something like the transformation that Elsa undergoes over the course of the movies, where she becomes first a wise and just queen (at the end of the first movie), and then withdraws to become a guardian of nature (at the end of the second movie). Elsa, in the end, becomes what her family, kingdom, and nature need her to be.

For Stoics, the idea that the natural world “wants” or “needs” us to lead certain sorts of lives is more than a mere metaphor. Their physics, for example, holds that the universe is closely analogous to a living being. Moreover, it is a highly *rational* and *goal-directed* living being, whose constituent parts (including the humans

that lived within it) are arranged in the best possible way. In *On the Nature of the Gods*, Cicero describes the Stoics as positing “a nature which holds the entire cosmos together and preserves it and which is endowed with sense-perception and reason” (2.29). In this sense, the Stoic universe can helpfully be thought of as a sort of “world soul,” or perhaps even as “God.” However, it is an *immanent* sort of God existing within the world of physical things rather than a *transcendent* one existing outside of space and time. The goal of individual humans is to live in accordance with this nature.

In many ways, Elsa’s Arendelle provides a paradigmatic example of Stoic physics. Elsa’s encounters with the elemental spirits in *Frozen 2*, for example, suggest that Arendelle exists in a world built out of just those physical elements—earth, air, fire, and water—that early Stoic physical theory positedⁱⁱ. More importantly, however, is how the world composed of these physical elements seems to self-consciously *respond* to deviations from the social and natural order. In *Frozen 2*, for example, we learn that Elsa’s and Anna’s Grandfather, King Runeard, upset the existing order of the world by tricking the native Northuldra people and building a dam on their lands. This, in turn, disrupted the equilibrium of first the “Enchanted Forest,” and later of the kingdom as a whole. The world of Arendelle, in turn, counters this disruption first by creating Elsa, and then by pushing her in a variety of ways to use her powers to restore the natural state of the world. Arendelle, for example, is a world in which prophecy can work, at least when done by experts such as Grand Pabbie, and which can “call” on its inhabitants for help more directly (as when it “sings” to Elsa in the voice of her lost mother). Alongside such obvious interventions, Arendelle’s world soul can, presumably, intervene in a thousand more subtle ways; for example, by sending the storm that kills Anna’s and Elsa’s parents, and thus setting the two sisters on their respective life-paths. In the next section, we’ll explore in more detail both the problems and the opportunities this thorough-going Stoic *determinism* raises for Elsa.

Where Stoic physics is concerned with describing the movements and purposes of nature, Stoic logic focuses on how we can know about such things. In this respect, Arendelle also provides a useful model. Early Stoics such as Chrysippus presented a logic based on the then-novel notion of *propositions*, or the sorts of utterances that could be either true or false (Diogenes Laertius 7.63-73). So, for example, “Elsa is Anna’s sister” and “Elsa is a reindeer” are both propositions, but only one of these is true in the world of the movies. By contrast, questions such as “Why is Arendelle so cold?” and commands like “Seize her!” are examples of utterances that are not propositions.

So how do we figure which propositions are true, and which are false? According to the Stoics, we can simply trust our senses, so long as we attend carefully to what they are actually *presenting* to us, and are not carried away by inappropriate emotion. After all, our world is, by hypothesis, a rational and well-organized one. In this sort of world, it is simply inconceivable that our senses could systematically deceive as to what is true and what is false. Again, the Arendelle depicted in the *Frozen* movies abides by these rules. While Anna and Elsa are frequently mistaken in their beliefs (for example, in Anna’s initial belief that Hans would be a good fiancé, or Elsa’s conviction that her powers are a curse), these mistakes are, inevitably, portrayed as resulting from the sisters allowing emotions—such as fear or desire—to inappropriately overcome their rational faculties of judgment and assent. By contrast, when the sisters *listen* to what the world tells them—in prophecies, songs, and even their own emotions and reasoning capacities—they are unerringly correct.

3 STOIC ETHICS AND DOING WHAT’S NATURAL

If the argument so far is correct, the world of Arendelle exemplifies much of both Stoic metaphysics (the fundamental stuff out of which the world is made, and the properties of this stuff) and epistemology (how the inhabitants can know about this stuff). Arendelle is a world that “wants” to be in a certain state and can profitably be seen as taking “actions” to return to this state. It is, moreover, a world in which the inhabitants

can, if they pay close enough attention, discover what it is that Arendelle needs of them, and they can then respond appropriately.

Stoic ethics is premised on the idea that the good life is lived in accordance with the will of nature. So, for example, Marcus Aurelius writes as follows:

As the nature of the universal has given to every rational being all the powers that it has, so we have received from it this power also. For as the universal nature converts and fixes in its predestined place everything which stands in the way and opposes it, and makes such things a part of itself, so also the rational animal is able to make every hindrance its own material, and to use it for such purpose as it may have designed. (Aurelius and Long 1997, sec. 7.35)

In a similar vein, Chrysippus held that “to live according to virtue” is equivalent to “living according to the experience of events which occur by nature” and this held because “our natures are parts of the nature of the universe” (Diogenes Laertius 7.87).

A few things are worth noting here. First, insofar as Stoics assumed that the natural order was a good and rational one, we can assume that the various circumstances in which find ourselves (no matter how dire they might seem) are, in fact, the sorts of things that we can deal with using the capacities that nature has given to us, specifically the use of our reason. Second, and closely related to this, the Stoics argue that there is a tight link between the natural order of the world as a whole and our *natures as individuals*. We are inescapably parts of nature, and it is nature that gives us our physical capacities, our ability to reason, and the background experiences that shape our responses to the world. To “live according to nature” can thus mean both “to do what the larger world requires of me” or “to do what is my own nature to do.” For the Stoics, the rationality and goodness of the universe entail that these will always be the same. Finally, there is the idea of *predestination* or *fate*, and the importance of accepting and embracing both the world that we find ourselves living in and our place within it. Again, this follows naturally from the claim that nature is rational and good, and that everything that happens must thus have a good reason.

For the Stoics, then, “living according to nature”, means accepting one's place within the world, and to cease striving after things—such as political power, avoidance of death, or even the admiration and friendship of others—that we cannot have direct control over. To live in accord with nature means choosing rationally in whatever circumstance one finds oneself, and to learn to be satisfied with the *mere fact that one has chosen well*, even if this does not lead to the desired-for outcome. This gives rise to the famous Stoic doctrine of *indifferents* (Diogenes Laertius 7.102-7.107), which contends that we should be *indifferent* as to the actual outcomes of our actions, even as we attend carefully to the process of choosing itself—we should for example, while we should make choices that that promote our health, we should not allow ourselves to become upset if, despite our wise choices, we end up becoming illⁱⁱⁱ.

Elsa's evolution as a character, again, provides a model for understanding how this might work, and how might one achieve a life in accordance with nature, or Stoic “sagehood.”. Early in the first movie, we see her attempts to reject nearly all her roles within Arendelle: she strives to suppress her magical powers, withdraws from her familial relationship with Anna, and even flees from her duties as queen. Only after this low point, isolated and alone in the mountains, does she begin to live in accordance with what nature (both her own and the wider world) demand of her. She begins by accepting the reality of her powers (which she uses to sculpt an ice palace) and eventually comes to see the necessity of reengaging with both her sister Anna and with her social role as queen. In the second movie, Elsa responds to nature's increasing demands of her, which it delivers through mysterious songs, magical elemental creatures, and even visions. At the close of the second movie, she surrenders all political power and accepts her role as an intermediary between Arendelle's elemental forces and its human inhabitants. She has, it seems, achieved Stoic sage-hood.

4 IS ELSA’S FATE’S FOOL?

The Stoic universe is a regular, orderly one, where everything happens for a good reason, and where its inhabitants can thus be assured that they’ll never be faced with any challenge that can’t be met by careful, judicious use of their human reason. The universe, quite literally, has its own "plans" which it pursues by the motions of its constituent parts (which notably includes humans). As discussed in previous sections, this is key to making sense of Stoic ethics, which admonishes us to “live according to nature.” If we follow this advice, as Elsa does, we will thus find our proper role within that social and natural order of the world. It may be that this role is not what we’d originally expected or desired, but we can nevertheless be assured that it will fit us perfectly.

There is, however, something a bit off-putting about this whole picture, as even the earliest critics of the Stoics noted. In particular, it raised the problem of *fate*, and of the seeming inability of humans to shape their own lives. In his *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, Plutarch quotes Stoic Chrysippus as follows:

For since the common nature extends into everything, it will be necessary that everything that occurs in any way in the universe and in any of its parts should occur according to it [the common nature] and its reason, in proper and unhindered fashion, because there is nothing outside it which could hinder its organization nor could any of its parts be moved or be in a state otherwise than according to the common nature. (1050c-d)

Plutarch goes on to argue that this picture of fate has unwelcome consequences for Stoicism and that it may put Chrysippus in danger of self-contradiction. In particular, if every event happens just as it is determined to occur, then it is hard to see how Stoics could allow for either (1) a category of *possible* events which could happen, but which might not happen, or (2) a sense of genuine human responsibility for their actions (as opposed to, say, blaming their failures on the machinations of the gods)^{iv}.

Elsa's development provides a vivid illustration of this problem. Arendelle has, in a quite direct way, *made Elsa what she is*. It provides her with magical ice powers, apparently because of the bravery of her mother in saving her father. It does not, however, grant the young Elsa with the ability to control these powers, and it doesn't bestow her on sister Anna with any way to protect herself from them. This leads, with more-than-seeming inevitability, to Anna's initial injury, to their parents' death in a storm at sea, and to Elsa's increasing agitation and anxiety, leading ultimately to the events depicted in the movies. Elsa, for all her power and grandeur, has no control over any of this. Even her recognition of the power of love (at the end of the first movie) and her realization that she is the Fifth Spirit (and the end of the second movie) are events that happen *to* her, as the result of both natural phenomenon and the actions of other characters, in particular her sister Anna.

What sense, then, does it make sense to say that Elsa “chose well” or “chose poorly” at different points in the movie? After all, it seems as if, according to the Stoic worldview, there is *nothing else* that Elsa could have done. Every event in the universe is, after all, caused by some other event. Taken together, this string of causes determines everything about Elsa, from the identity of her parents to her powers to the events of her childhood to the various crises to which she must respond in the *Frozen* movies. Stoics would emphasize that this is true not only of Elsa but of everyone as well. We must all follow the path that universe lays out for us. And if this is the case, then how can Elsa (or anyone else) genuinely *choose* to follow the principles of Stoic ethics, or be praised or blamed for how they, or don't, live morally decent lives more generally?

5 THE SHAPE OF A SOUL

Chrysippus offers perhaps the most well-known and influential Stoic attempt to resolve the problems discussed in the previous section. His argument has both a positive and a negative aspect. The positive aspect consists of an attempt to identify those events or actions for which we *are* responsible, even if they are ultimately fated. In general, Chrysippus argues that we can and should be held responsible for those actions that result from the inner workings of our character. To explain the role of character, he gives the analogy of a cylinder and a cone, and the differing ways in which these two objects move when they are pushed. The push is an external force, which can be compared to the various things that happen to us and call for responses on our part. The effects of this push are very different on the two objects, however: the cylinder simply rolls in a straight line, while the cone spins around in a circle. This motion, he argues, is due not to the external push, but the nature or “shape” of the objects themselves. This nature is thus analogous to our character, which allows us to voluntarily *assent* (or withhold assent) to what the world *presents* to us:

Just as he who pushes the cylinder gave it the start of motion, he did not, however, give it its 'rollability', so a presentation which strikes will certainly impress its object and, as it were, stamp its form on the mind, but our assent will be in our power, just as...the cylinder, when struck from without will henceforth be moved by its own force and nature" (Cicero, *On Fate*, sec. 43).

On this account, Elsa is accountable for precisely those actions that depend on her unique psychology. She is not, for instance, responsible for things such as being born heir to the throne, or having ice powers, or (more contentiously) her initial feelings of fear and regret when she injures Anna as a child. She certainly isn't responsible for Hans kidnapping her and putting her in a dungeon. These events were caused by forces entirely external to her. By contrast, Chrysippus would argue that she *is* responsible for such things as cutting off Anna from her life in response to her fear, and for fleeing Arendelle when she becomes upset. These are things that someone with a *different* psychology (a “cylinder” rather than a “cone”) might have done differently. Anna, for example, seems to have a very different sort of psychology, and might well have made very different choices in response to these situations.

This sort of response has not always placated critics of Stoicism (Brennan 2001). After all, they might argue, what difference does it make *to Elsa* that Anna would have chosen differently if put in her shoes? Elsa's and Anna's difference in character is, according to Stoic metaphysics, itself entirely determined by things that are themselves out of the sister's control, from their differing genetics to the subtle differences in the way their parents and others interacted with them. Given that Elsa can't choose to be Anna, why should she be held responsible for “not acting as Anna would have done?”

To answer this worry, we can turn to the negative aspect of the Stoic argument, and ask the critics of Stoicism how character and choice should or could be related, if not in the way the Stoics suggest. First, consider the nature of character itself. As much as the idea that character is determined by some combination of genetics and environment might seem distasteful, it is difficult to see how any *alternative* account of character will be more palatable. For example, would Elsa be freer if the internal works of her psychology were determined by the random, uncaused movements of particles, as both the ancient Epicureans and some modern libertarians about free will hold^{vi}? Second, we can consider the relationship *between* character and the choice that is made. Similar considerations apply: if our choices are not caused by our character, then they must be caused by *something else*. And again, it is difficult to imagine what sort of something else this could be if isn't part of character.

6 THE LAZY ARGUMENT

Over the course of the *Frozen* movies, we see Elsa transform from an isolated and scared girl to a young woman who has fully accepted her roles within the wider world, be these political (queen), familial (a sister to Anna, and something like a mother to the snowman Olaf), or natural (as intermediary to the elemental spirits). She also seems to calmly accept those roles that fate has excluded her from. For example, she gives up both the throne and her home when she discovers she is the Fifth Spirit and feels no apparent angst over her lack of a romantic partner over the course of the first two movies. She still grieves for her lost parents, but not excessively so, just as Stoic philosophers would have counseled^{vii}. This is all in keeping with the picture of Elsa as a Stoic sage who bends her will to accord with the demands of nature. When nature calls, she does what is required, and does it without reservation.

One of the most famous objections to Stoicism—the so-called “Lazy Argument”—contends that it is *irrational* for Elsa to behave in this way, at least if Stoics are correct in their assumptions about the power of fate and causal determinism. Cicero describes the objection as follows:

If it is fated for you to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will recover; similarly, if it is fated for you not to recover from this illness whether you call the doctor or not, you will recover. And one of the two is fated; therefore, there is no point in calling the doctor. (*On Fate* sec. 28)

The structure of the argument seems to be as follows:

1. Every event is either fated to occur or not. So, for example, it either will be the case the Arendelle will be destroyed by extreme weather (as threatens to be the case in both movies) or it will not.
2. No amount of effort by any individual is sufficient to make a *difference* as to what is fated. So, for example, Elsa’s power cannot change fate.
3. It is only rational for individuals to exert effort if they can make some difference.
4. So, it is irrational for anyone to exert any effort, ever. Elsa shouldn’t bother trying to save Arendelle.

This argument is meant to serve as a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* to the whole Stoic project. The Stoic doctrine of fate, and the importance of accepting it, is first and foremost meant to help lead better, more ethical lives. If it turns out that this doctrine instead encourages laziness, cowardice, and apathy, this would be a strong reason to reject Stoicism altogether.

Chrysippus responds to the Lazy argument by arguing that it fails to distinguish between *simple* events and *conjoined* (or *co-fated*) events (sec. 30). So, for example, some simple events would be “Arendelle is saved from destruction” and “Elsa gains control over her powers after much effort” while a conjoined event would be “Arendelle is saved from destruction AND Elsa gains control over her powers after much effort.”

Chrysippus argues that the Lazy Argument ignores the relationship between co-fated events, and assumes that it would be possible to have Arendelle saved from destruction *without* Elsa’s efforts to control her powers. This, he points out, is an unjustified assumption. Instead, Elsa’s effort (or her lack of effort) are just as much as a matter of fate as anything else, as is their *relationship* with other events.

The success of Chrysippus’ attempted rebuttal hinges crucially on what exactly we take the conclusion of the Lazy Argument to be. If the conclusion requires that we (as rational individuals) cease to apply any effort, it is fair enough to respond that our effort—or lack of effort—is itself a matter of fate, just as much as anything else. Moreover, we might have perfectly good evidence that, as a matter of fact, instances of saving-the-world tend to be preceded by instances of people-trying-hard-to-save-the-world. There is thus no *logical* contradiction between the Stoic doctrine of fate and the truism that hard work breeds success.

However, the conclusion (that Elsa “shouldn’t bother”) might be a more invidious one: what if the idea is that, in the mere entertaining of the Lazy Argument, we rationally come to see ourselves—and our actions—as being fundamentally inconsequential and meaningless? What if, for example, Elsa woke up one day with the thought that “my whole life has been decided for me, from the circumstances of my birth, to the death of my parents, to my psychological quirks, to the words of the songs I sing. Nothing is up to me! Why should I even bother?” The argument on this reading, is an empirical claim about the *effects* of believing Stoic doctrine on motivation, as opposed to a logical puzzle regarding the nature of determinism itself.

If the Lazy Argument is, indeed, a psychological one, Elsa can help us see a way out of the puzzle. The Lazy Argument is based on the idea that, all things being equal, it is *preferable* for us to be lazy, cowardly, or apathetic and to resist the demands of the larger world rather than “give into them.” Elsa’s experience shows that this is simply unrealistic. Elsa’s early life is, in some ways, the epitome of a “lazy” life: she refuses to use her magical powers, cuts herself off from her subjects, and basically stays alone in her room, trying desperately to avoid taking her “fated” place in the larger social and natural world. However, this does not lead to a happier, freer life; instead, it proves to be something like the opposite. In her attempts to escape what fate demands of her, Elsa cuts herself off from precisely those aspects of her life—human relationships, creativity, engagement with nature, and making a positive difference on the world—that make living bearable in the first place.

Elsa’s eventual insight, on this interpretation, is to realize that “accepting one’s fate” need not contradict a view of oneself as a free individual capable of making genuine *choices*. These choices are not concerned with “changing fate” (which verges on incoherence) but instead with changing her life, the lives of those around her, and the natural world in which they live. Her sense of freedom is, in the end, a thoroughly Stoic one, grounded in the recognition that we are inescapably a part of innumerable different communities, and that is only by embracing our membership these communities that we can fully become ourselves. We are, in the end, beings who are always embedded in a complex network of familial, social, political, and natural relationships. These relationships are the sources of fate’s “demands” of us, but also provide us with the resources to meet these demands. There is, in fact, nothing else to our lives besides this.

7 CONCLUSION: ELSA AS STOIC HERO

The problem raised by the Lazy Argument—that of trying to reconcile human choice and moral responsibility with the thesis that we are, at bottom, physical beings governed by the same laws as other physical objects—is by no means Stoic’s problem alone. Indeed, *causal determinism*—the claim that there are no “uncaused” physical events—is implicit in much of modern science. Moreover, the Stoic response to determinism, which consists of an attempt to show how we can still have meaningful human lives against this background, is the distant ancestors of today’s dominant *compatibilist* accounts of free will. Elsa’s struggle to deal with her fate should thus be of more than passing interest to us, as should her Stoical strategies in meeting this challenge.

To conclude, I’d like to briefly consider a potential criticism to the ideal of “Stoic hero”: namely, that such as a person is too likely to accept the world as they find it, and is thus unlikely to challenge an unjust status quo. So, for example, consider the case of a society with unjust gender roles, where women are denied the opportunities allowed to men. Classical Stoic thinkers clearly recognized that women are both rational and capable of virtue; however, they generally argued that what was *rational* for women to do was to conform to the roles that their society assigned to them, and simply do their best in these sorts of roles, as opposed to challenging them (Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014). Strikingly similar criticisms have been made of the character of Elsa: that despite her power, she still exemplifies harmful gender stereotypes, in particular in the

way her political and magical power are seen (both by her and others) as being incompatible with traditional romantic or other relationships (Streiff and Dundes 2017).

Somewhat more controversially, one could argue that these same sorts of concerns are borne out by the lives of prominent historical Stoics, particularly those who—like Elsa—actually managed to wield power. Seneca, for example, famously become rich serving as a counselor and public advocate for the vicious Nero, going so far as to compose letters defending Nero’s murder of his mother Agrippina. Marcus Aurelius, for his part, may have helped end the *Pax Romana* when he allowed his biological son Commodus to become his heir, as opposed to adopting an heir who might have been better suited for the task, as many previous Emperors had done. One can plausibly interpret these failings as mere philosophical inconsistency, or even as well-intended interventions gone awry. However, one might also worry that the Stoic doctrine to accept the “natural order of things” played a role in their unwise acquiescence.

If understood properly, Elsa points to a more fully realized version of Stoicism that helps mitigate such worries. Elsa’s conception of the world, for instance, notably goes *beyond* that of the social, familial, and professional contexts in which she finds herself. Elsa does, not for example, seem to think of her exclusively as a queen, sister to Anna, or even magic-user. Instead, in embracing her role as the Fifth Spirit, she must conceive of herself as something like a “citizen of the universe,” and come to see her own capacities and limitations in this new, larger context. Such a perspective crucially gives her *distance* from the roles she plays in existing human communities, which in turn allows her to envision the ways in which these communities could and should work. So, for example, the mature Elsa we see at the close of the second movie is perfectly capable of imagining ways in which relations between Arendelle and Northuldra people could be improved, or how the *status quo* of humanity’s relationship to the natural environment needs to change. This same strategy—of shifting one’s focus from local circumstances to the universe as a whole—can provide a fulcrum for Stoics to challenge the existing order.

In the end, of course, one might still object that the Stoic view of nature—as fundamentally benevolent and amenable to human reason—can blind one to the injustice and suffering that exist in both the social and natural world. After all, Elsa is far cry from a revolutionary on issues such as politics or gender, where she seems to aim for reform rather than abolition. She, like Marcus Aurelius, aims to be a good monarch rather than a person who ends monarchy. And she, like her sister Anna, is clearly cast from the same mold as previous Disney’s Princesses, albeit with some very important differences.

The Stoic response here, it seems to me, is to reiterate that their philosophy is ultimately intended to be a *practical* one, which teaches its practitioners to accept what cannot be changed precisely so that they can exert their efforts on those things that can. Elsa provides a model for what this sort of “active acceptance” might look like, and how “fate” need not prevent one from being a genuine hero. A Stoic hero is, by definition, one who understands that there are many things—about society, the natural world, even their own psychological makeup—that are beyond their power to change. Their response to this, however, is not fatalism but a calm, dedicated, sustained attempt to help the world of which they are a part become the sort of place that they know it *wants* to be. They find satisfaction not in their successes, but in their strivings, confident that even their failures help to bring this about. They, like Elsa, knows that they are a part of everything, and that even their smallest movement will reverberate through the ice-covered landscape.

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ⁱ Unless otherwise explicitly noted, all references to classical writings by and about Stoic philosophers are taken from Inwood and Gerson's *The Stoics Reader* (Inwood and Gerson 2008), which provides translations of many important Stoic texts. Good, general introduction to Stoicism includes Inwood (2018), Baltzly (2019), and Pigliucci (2021).

ⁱⁱ A small wrinkle concerns Elsa's eventual discovery that she is the "fifth" elemental spirit, which would be in keeping more with Aristotelian philosophy (which posited a fifth, non-physical element of "quintessence") than with Stoicism's more thorough-going physicalism. Even here, however, a committed Stoic could presumably argue that Elsa serves as something more like an "organizing principle" of nature than as a separate element.

ⁱⁱⁱ The purest expression of this sort of view in the *Frozen* movies arguably comes in Anna's song "The Next Right Thing," in which she commits to acting rightly even when she thinks that everyone she cares about (Elsa, Kristoff, Olaf, etc.) are lost to her.

^{iv} The definitive treatment of the Stoic attitude toward fate, and its complex relationship with ideas such as "necessity" is provided in a series of articles and books by Susan Bobzien (1997; 1998b; 1998a; 2005). My treatment here is indebted to these.

^v In *On Fate*, Cicero describes the argument against Stoicism as follows: "If everything happens by fate, everything occurs by an antecedent cause, and if impulse [is caused], then also what follows from impulse [is caused]; therefore assent too. But if this cause of impulse is not in us then impulse itself is not in our own power; and if this is so, not even what is produced by impulse is in our power; therefore, neither assent nor action is in our power. From which it follows that neither praise nor blame nor honor nor punishment are fair" (sec. 40).

^{vi} The relationship between free will and quantum mechanics has remained a contested one. Loewer (1996) and Bishop (2002) both give nuanced introductions. De Caro and Putnam (2020) provide an argument that quantum mechanics is ill-suited to rescue so-called *libertarian* conceptions of free will, according to which free will requires *violations* of the sort of determinism posited by the Stoics.

^{vii} Early on, Stoics recognized that the death of loved ones (and our knowledge of their inevitable deaths) was among the most challenging things for humans to deal with, and this certainly seems to be the case for Elsa and Anna. It can, in fact, make it difficult for people to love at all. Epictetus advises that we can deal with these emotions, in part, by surrendering the idea that our loved ones are "ours" to begin with: "Never say about anything, 'I have lost it,' but instead say 'I have given it back.' Did your child die? It was given back. Did your wife die? She was given back...How does the way the giver asked for it back concern you? As long as he gives it, take care of it as something that is not your own, just as travelers treat an inn" (Epictetus 1983, sec. 11)