

Polybius and Stoic *Tyche*

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IN MACHIAVELLI'S *Il Principe*, ch. 25, “How much power *fortunà* has over human affairs, and how it should be resisted,” the notion of *fortunà* is pivotal. There Machiavelli uses *fortunà* in a somewhat confusing manner in basically three different senses. However, if these various senses are carefully distinguished, Machiavelli's use of the term can be said to be consistent.¹ A similar point can be made with regard to the Greek equivalent of *fortunà* in Polybius. Polybius uses the notion of *tyche* in a variety of senses too: in Hadwig Helm's article in the *Polybios-Lexikon*, nine columns are filled with occurrences of this word, in what at first sight appears to be a bewildering variety of meanings.² Various attempts have been made to come to terms with Polybius's use of *tyche*.³ Among these, two interpretations seem to be particularly influential: the first, most eloquently formulated by de Roveri, is that *tyche* is best characterised in a negative manner, as “the unknown in history.”⁴ According to de Roveri, *tyche* would be used by the historian otherwise at a loss as how to rationally explain certain

¹ See R. Price, “Notes on the Vocabulary of *The Prince*,” in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, eds. Q. Skinner, R. Price (Cambridge 1988) 100–113, at 105–106.

² A. Mauersberger et al., *Polybios-Lexikon* III.2 (Berlin 2004) 707–714 s.v. *τύχη*.

³ See D. Musti, “Polibio negli studi dell'ultimo ventennio (1950–1970),” *ANRW* I.2 (1972) 1114–1181, at 1126–1127, for the *status quaestionis* to 1972.

⁴ A. de Roveri, “Tyche in Polibio,” *Convivium* 24 (1956) 275–293, at 290 (German transl. in K. Stiewe, N. Holzberg [eds.], *Polybius* [Darmstadt 1982] 297–326, at 305): “la x della Storia” (“das x der Geschichte”).

events or processes. The second interpretation, proposed by Frank Walbank among others, is that it is impossible to offer a consistent definition of *tyche* in Polybius: *tyche* has rather to be understood as a generic term, which has a variety of “notoriously” different meanings, ranging from mere chance to an avenging deity or *Nemesis*. The meaning of *tyche* would thus be dependent upon the context in which it is used.⁵

In this paper I will argue that two basic usages of *tyche* in Polybius’s *Histories* can be distinguished. What is more, these usages are conceptually more coherent than is often assumed, for which the philosophical theory of Stoicism can provide a clue.⁶ The approach defended here will be different from the one provided by Hirzel in the nineteenth century, who also proposed the thesis that Polybius’s notion of *tyche* had to be understood from the perspective of Stoicism. Hirzel’s view,⁷ part of the larger thesis that Polybius should be regarded as a full-blown Stoic, was that Polybius’s notion of *tyche* is to be equated with the Stoic notion of divine providence or *pronoia*.⁸ Hirzel’s thesis provoked fierce critical reactions. The thrust of these

⁵ F. W. Walbank, “Polybius, Philinus, and the First Punic War,” *CQ* 39 (1945) 1–18, at 6; *A Historical Commentary on Polybius I* (Oxford 1957) 16–26; *Polybius* (Berkeley 1972) 58–65; “Introduction” in *Polybius, The Rise of the Roman Empire* (Harmondsworth 1979) 9–40, at 26–30; “Polybios,” in H. H. Schmitt, E. Vogt (eds.), *Lexikon des Hellenismus* (Wiesbaden 2005) 840–845, at 841; and “Fortune (*tyche*) in Polybius,” in J. Marincola (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (Malden 2005) II 349–355 (“rhetorical”). Cf. Chr. Habicht in his introduction to W. R. Paton, F. W. Walbank, Chr. Habicht, *Polybius. The Histories I* (LCL 2010) xxv: “One has to conclude that he [Polybius] lacked the analytical acumen...”

⁶ For a recent interpretation in which the Stoicism of Polybius’s use of *tyche* is also stressed see C. Darbo-Peschanski, *L’Historia. Commencements grecs* (Paris 2007) 302–308 (cf. n.58 below).

⁷ R. Hirzel, *Untersuchungen zu Cicero’s philosophischen Schriften II* (Leipzig 1882) 840–907, esp. 867 ff.

⁸ See also H. J. Edwards in his introduction to W. R. Paton, *Polybius. The Histories I* (LCL 1922) xiii: “He was a Stoic, and he believed that the Roman order of things was part of a divine Providence that ruled the world.”

were first that Polybius did not refer to *tyche* in the sense of divine foresight, and second that where Polybius referred to *pronoia*, he did so in the sense of human rather than divine foresight.⁹ My aim is more modest: rather than arguing that Polybius has to be considered as a full-blown Stoic, my proposal is that two approaches with regard to *tyche* can be discerned in Polybius, and moreover that these two approaches can be conceptually reconciled from a Stoic perspective. While thus agreeing with Walbank that Polybius's notion of *tyche* cannot be characterised under one single heading, different from Walbank I suggest that Polybius offers two different meanings of *tyche*, which in the end—in the context of a popularised form of Stoicism—are consistent. In doing so we will also get a more comprehensive understanding of de Roveri's negative characterisation of *tyche*.¹⁰

I will first deal with the earliest Stoic evidence on *tyche*. I will next assess the passages that have dominated the discussion of Polybius's understanding of *tyche* and at the same time seem to suggest contradictory interpretations of the notion. I will then show how the Stoic material can be used to reconcile these approaches.

The Stoics on tyche

As is so very often the case with regard to the Stoics the extant evidence on *tyche* is limited. However, there is just enough to let us conclude that they paid serious attention to the notion of *tyche*, such as to allow us to incorporate this not very well known evidence into their much-debated theory of a universal causal determinism. According to this theory everything in this

⁹ By esp. R. Herodot, *La conception de l'histoire dans Polybe* (Lausanne 1902) 96–103; cf. R. von Scala, *Die Studien des Polybios* (Stuttgart 1890) 214 n.5; E. Mioni, *Polibio* (Padua 1949) 147–150; Walbank, *Commentary* I 21 ff., *Polybius* 58–65.

¹⁰ I have benefited greatly from de Roveri, *Convivium* 24 (1956) 275–293, in which the Stoic background is suggested, but not developed—see e.g. 293 (325).

physical world is part of an encompassing causal network.¹¹ As in the Stoic view everything in this network can be explained in terms of reason, the implication is that in the final analysis, that is from the point of view of the sage as the perfect rational being, there simply is no place for *tyche*.¹² If reference to *tyche* can be made at all, it can only be from the point of view of the imperfect rational being, who would thus in fact express his or her inability to explain a particular event within the overall causal scheme of things.

In the extant evidence that contains a reference to *tyche*,¹³ a keen interest in the notion can already be discovered in Sphaerus and Persaeus, two pupils of Zeno of Citium, the founder of Stoicism. Sphaerus wrote a book *On Tyche*, as we know from the catalogue in Diogenes Laertius (7.177 [SVF I 620]). But unfortunately we do not know anything more about the contents of the book. More revealing are two passages in the extant Stoic corpus which describe the sage as invulnerable to *tyche* as well as in no need of it. In the first (from Themistius), Persaeus, Zeno's favourite pupil, declared the wise person to be not only "unenslaved, unmixed, and unaffected," but also "invulnerable to *tyche*."¹⁴ In the second (from Proclus), the Stoic sage is said to

¹¹ Helpful overviews on Stoic determinism are R. J. Hankinson, "Determinism and Indeterminism," in K. A. Algra et al. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge 1999) 513–541, and D. Frede, "Stoic Determinism," in B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge 2003) 179–205. More technical are R. Salles, *The Stoics on Determinism and Compatibilism* (Aldershot 2005), and—the fullest account to date—S. Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy* (Oxford 1998).

¹² It is no surprise therefore that against the background of Stoic determinism both Salles, *Stoics*, and Bobzien, *Determinism*, neglect the notion of *tyche* altogether.

¹³ Passages are assembled in A. A. Buriks, *περὶ τύχης. De ontwikkeling van het begrip tyche tot aan de Romeinse tijd, hoofdzakelijk in de filosofie* (Leiden 1948) 92–102.

¹⁴ Them. *Or.* 32.358b (SVF I 449): ὁ σοφὸς ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης ἀήττητός ἐστι καὶ ἀδούλωτος καὶ ἀκέραιος καὶ ἀπαθής. Cf. G. Herzog-Hauser, "Tyche," *RE* 7 (1948) 1643–1689, at 1670; G. Busch, "Fortunae resistere in der

be in no need of *tyche*.¹⁵ If these two passages are read in combination, the meaning of *tyche* appears to be both bad and good luck respectively: in the first the sage is invulnerable to bad luck, in the second he is said to be in no need of good luck either. The explanation for the sage's indifference towards either manifestation of luck, good or bad, is given in yet another of these sparse passages: according to the Stoics *fortuna* is related to "intermediates."¹⁶ Intermediates, ἀδιάφορα, is the Stoics' technical term for matters that are neither truly good nor truly bad, such as health, physical beauty, etc., as opposed to the only matter that is truly good, a virtuous disposition.¹⁷ In short: according to the Stoics fortune may appear to be good or bad, but is really indifferent.

If the state of the extant evidence is providing any indication, however, the main approach towards *tyche* in Stoicism was different from the *ethical* approach just described. In a variety of sources we find that the doctrine of *tyche* is used when for a human being (or for human understanding as other sources have it) the "explanation" (*aitia*) is unclear.¹⁸ Consider first the notions of cause and explanation. A definition of explanation is ascribed to Chrysippus:¹⁹ "An 'explanation' (*aitia*) is an 'account' (*logos*) of a 'cause' (*aition*), or an account of the cause as cause."²⁰ Chrysippus thus directly links explanation to cause.

Moral des Philosophen Seneca," in G. Maurach (ed.), *Seneca als Philosoph* (Darmstadt 1975 [orig. 1961]) 53–94, at 57.

¹⁵ Procl. *In Tim.* 61B (*SVF* III 52): οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς Στοᾶς τὸν σπουδαῖον οὐδέν φασι δεῖσθαι τῆς τύχης.

¹⁶ Serv. *In Aen.* 8.334 (*SVF* II 972).

¹⁷ Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 98.2: *materiam dat* [sc. *fortuna*] *bonorum ac malorum et initia rerum apud nos in malum bonumve exiturarum.*

¹⁸ E.g. Aetius 1.29.7 s.v. *περὶ τύχης* (*SVF* II 966): οἱ Στωϊκοὶ ἄδηλον αἰτίαν ἀνθρωπίνῳ λογισμῷ. Cf. Simplicius *In Phys.* 333 (II 965), Alex. *Mant.* 179.6 (II 967), Alex. *Aphr. Fat.* 8.174.1 (II 970), Serv. *In Aen.* 8.334 (II 972).

¹⁹ Stob. 1.139.4–5 (*SVF* II 336; A. A. Long, D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* [Cambridge 1987] 55A)

²⁰ αἰτίαν δ' εἶναι λόγον αἰτίου, ἢ λόγον τὸν περὶ τοῦ αἰτίου ὡς αἰτίου.

Here we touch upon one of the fundamental doctrines of Stoic physics: their theory of causation. In the same passage of Stobaeus (1.138.14 ff.) assembling descriptions of cause by Zeno, Chrysippus, and Posidonius, we find cause defined as the “by which” (*di’ ho*). On a physical level this cause is ultimately identified with a single immanent active principle.²¹ In terms of traditional Greek religion the Stoics called it Zeus.²² In more technical terminology they referred to this principle in a bewildering variety of ways, such as (a special kind of) “fire” (*pur*), “reason” (*logos*), “intelligence” (*dianoia*), “providence” (*pronoia*), and “fate” (*heimarmene*),²³ each of these names bringing out a different aspect of the active principle.²⁴

This single active principle acts upon the passive (or matter, as it is sometimes called²⁵) by pervading everything.²⁶ The pervasion by the active principle is less so (in physical terms more diluted) in the case of stones, plants, and living beings, more so in the case of adult human beings. Moreover, human beings occupy a special place in this hierarchy: unlike all other beings, they are rational, having developed in themselves a spark of this divine reason. As rational beings they have access to the active principle in its supreme, divine form, and can thus

Cf. J. Mansfeld, “Chrysippus’ Definition of Cause in Arius Didymus,” *Elenchos* 22 (2001) 99–109, on the text of this passage.

²¹ Discussed by e.g. Bobzien, *Determinism* 16–17; and in relation to Sen. *Ep.* 65 by D. Sedley, “Stoic Metaphysics at Rome,” in R. Salles (ed.), *Metaphysics, Soul and Ethics in Ancient Thought* (Oxford 2005) 117–142, at 137, and B. Inwood, *Seneca. Selected Philosophical Letters* (Oxford 2007) 138, 145.

²² E.g. Stob. 1.31.12–14 (*SVF* II 1062).

²³ E.g. Diog. Laert. 7.135 (*SVF* I 102(2), Long/Sedley 46B).

²⁴ For discussion see e.g. Bobzien, *Determinism* 45–47; Hankinson, in *Cambridge History* 526–527; T. Brennan, *The Stoic Life* (Oxford 2005) 240.

²⁵ The reference to matter is confusing, as the active principle is said to be material too, i.e. in the final analysis a special kind of fire.

²⁶ E.g. Aetius 1.7.33 (*SVF* II 1027, Long/Sedley 46A). The corporeality of the active principle is a matter of debate, however: see Sedley, in Salles, *Metaphysics* 137.

not only play an active role themselves, but also understand their role in the network of causes. In other words: to a certain extent they can determine their causal roles, as well as give explanations of these in the grander scheme of things.²⁷

It cannot be stressed enough that although initially reason develops naturally in human beings, eventually adult human beings have to develop their rational faculties and insights themselves. Only when they have brought reason within themselves to perfection will they be in complete *homologia*, as the Stoic expression goes; that is, they will have brought their reason into consistency with the reason that guides the universe. Thus, only for the perfectly rational being or “sage” (*sophos*) will his course of action be in complete consistency with the order of things, and also—in hindsight—his understanding thereof, i.e. the sage’s explanations, will be wholly in line with divine reason.²⁸ By contrast, the inferior person can and will often be wrong about the right course of action and the subsequent explanation. The inferior person has but an imperfect insight into the order, and will thus at best not always be able to act in accordance with it, and offer at best reasonable explanations only.²⁹

The discovery of the order, let alone living in consistency with it, is according to the Stoics extremely difficult. The result is that no one has ever achieved it (with the exception of heroes

²⁷ See e.g. Bobzien, *Determinism* 242.

²⁸ With a few exceptions, such as with regard to the heap paradox or *sorites*, when even the sage will have to fall silent (e.g. Cic. *Luc.* 93 [*SVF* II 277]; K. Hülser, *Fragmente zur Dialektik der Stoiker* IV [Stuttgart 1988] fr. 1243). However, these exceptions may be regarded as concessions by Chrysippus in the debate with his (Academic) adversaries. (I owe this observation to Malcolm Schofield.)

²⁹ For an explanation of this radical distinction between the inferior person and the sage in physiological terms see R. Brouwer, “The Early Stoic Doctrine of the Change to Wisdom,” *OSAPh* 33 (2007) 285–315; K. Vogt, *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (New York 2008) 134–135; I. Liu, “Nature and Knowledge in Stoicism: On the Ordinarity of the Stoic Sage,” *Apeiron* 41 (2009) 247–275.

like Heracles, and perhaps Socrates). The early Stoics apparently included even themselves among the inferior persons.³⁰ One example may suffice. In Galen we find Chrysippus accepting his status as an inferior person, apologising for not being able to give adequate explanations for causes: “In time the affections cease ... but the reason why this happens he [sc. Chrysippus] says is difficult to find out.”³¹

We now have a further reason why the Stoics maintained that the sage is both in no need of *tyche*, as in the Proclus passage, as well as invulnerable to *tyche*, as in Themistius’s testimony. For the sage there simply is no such thing as *tyche*. The sage, being an active part of the divine cause, will be able to understand particular causes within the scheme of the whole. Incidentally, this need not imply omniscience, as is sometimes thought, and for the Stoics it surely does not, as the sage needs only to know what is of his concern, what relates to *his* own place in the network of causes.³² By contrast, it is the inferior person who, by virtue of his incorrect understanding of the rational order of things, may think that he is vulnerable to the strokes of *tyche* or that he is in need of *tyche*. If an inferior person

³⁰ See R. Brouwer, “Stoic Sagehood,” *OSAPh* 23 (2002) 181–224.

³¹ Gal. *On Platonic and Hippocratic Doctrines* 4.7.18 De Lacy (*SVF* III 466; Posidonius test. 101 E.-K.): ἐν τῷ χρόνῳ παύεται τὰ πάθη ... διὰ τίνα μέντοι τὴν αἰτίαν τοῦτο γίνεται, δυσλόγιστον εἶναί φησιν. Further evidence is in M. Frede, “The Original Notion of Cause,” in M. Schofield et al. (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford 1980) 217–249, at 225 (repr. M. Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* [Minneapolis 1987] 125–150, at 131), to which Strabo’s criticism of Posidonius at 2.3.8 (test. 85 E.-K.) can be added: Strabo scorns Posidonius for giving too many explanations, calling it “aetiologising and Aristotelising” (cf. Diog. Laert. 5.32: ἔν τε τοῖς φυσικοῖς αἰτιολογικώτατος [αἰτιολογώτατος Marcovich] παρὰ πάντας ἐγένετο [sc. Aristotle] μάλιστα) and remarks that this should be avoided, “because of the obscurity of the causes” (πολὸν γάρ ἐστι τὸ αἰτιολογικὸν παρ’ αὐτῷ [sc. Posidonius] καὶ τὸ Ἀριστοτελίζον, ὅπερ ἐκκλίνουσιν οἱ ἡμέτεροι διὰ τὴν ἐπίκρυψιν τῶν αἰτιῶν).

³² Cf. G. B. Kerferd, “What Does the Wise man Know?” in J. Rist (ed.), *The Stoics* (Berkeley 1978) 125–136.

speaks of *tyche* as such, he in fact reflects his misunderstanding of the operations of the active principle in the world. The popular invocation of *tyche* by the inferior person can thus be interpreted in a Stoic sense as a reference to the active principle or reason when that principle is not understood.

This interpretation of *tyche* as the active principle or reason inadequately understood by ordinary human beings can be nicely contrasted with a notion that is closely related to *tyche*: *kairos* or opportunity. According to the Stoics, the sage always seizes the “right opportunity,” or is in a state of *eukairia*.³³ *Tyche* is thus used by the non-sage when he is unable to explain a particular event; while *kairos* is used by the sage, who is not only able to explain an event in terms of a greater whole but also able to determine the right moment upon which he may embark upon a certain course of action.

There is a further sense in which the Stoics may have adopted the popular usage of *tyche*. In the Hellenistic period the worship of *Tyche* as a god had become an especially noteworthy phenomenon.³⁴ For an imperfect rational being a sharp divide exists between the actual course of things caused by the divine rational force in the universe on the one hand and the understanding of this course on the other hand. This cleft may invite human beings to worship this rational force in terms of *Tyche*. This is not to say that the Stoics worshipped this force as *Tyche*. If they worshipped reason at all, they did so in the traditional

³³ In Cic. *Fin.* 3.45 (*SVF* III 524) *εὐκαιρία* is equated with the Stoic interpretation of the end as *convenientia* (Cicero’s translation of *ὁμολογία*, *Fin.* 3.60 [*SVF* III 763]); according to Stob. 2.108.10 (*SVF* III 630) the sage is characterised as *εὐκαιρος*.

³⁴ On the cult of *Tyche* in the Hellenistic period see e.g. G. S. Gasparro, “*Daimôn* and *Tychê* in the Hellenistic Religious Experience,” in P. Bilde et al. (eds.), *Conventional Values of the Hellenistic Greeks* (Aarhus 1997) 67–109, at 81 (“importance ... hardly needs dwelling upon”); T. S. Scheer, “tyche” in Schmitt/Vogt, *Lexikon des Hellenismus* 1093 (with reference to further literature). This is not to say that *Tyche* had not been important before the Hellenistic period. (I owe this observation to Robert Parker.)

guise of Zeus, of which Cleanthes's *Hymn to Zeus* is the most obvious example (*SVF* I 537, Long/Sedley 54I): "Hail to you Zeus ... I shall hymn you and sing for ever of your might ... We are your offspring ... We alone bear a likeness to god" (1–2, 6).

To sum up: according to the Stoics, from the point of view of the perfect person, *tyche* is but an illusion: any event ordinarily ascribed to *tyche* can in the end be explained in terms of reason. From the point of view of the inferior person, *tyche* can be used as a colloquial expression for that part of the divine rational force which guides all, but which is not yet properly understood by the only beings in the order of things potentially capable of doing so.³⁵ These two aspects, first *tyche* used as a term to refer to a force, and second the lack of understanding that goes with this usage, both to be found at the level of the inferior person, will have to be kept in mind in considering the notion of *tyche* in Polybius.

Polybius's use of tyche

In attempting to offer an alternative interpretation of *tyche* in Polybius I will address the two passages in his extant work which have been the focus of debate, 1.4 and 36.17. These not only allow us to acquire some insight into the theoretical background of Polybius's work, but also illustrate two apparently contradictory aspects of *tyche*, which I will call "epistemological" and "physical."

The epistemological approach can be found in 36.17.1:³⁶

For my part <says Polybius, in finding fault with those who ascribe public events and incidents in private life to *tyche* and

³⁵ Cf. Hankinson, in *Cambridge History* 535: "In the Stoic universe there is no room for chance"; Frede, in *Cambridge Companion* 183–184: "Chance and luck are therefore merely a matter of human ignorance: what seem to us like freak accidents are part of the overall order of nature."

³⁶ ἐγὼ δέ, φησὶν ὁ Πολύβιος ἐπιτιμῶν τοῖς τὴν τύχην καὶ τὴν εἰμαρμένην ἐπιγράφουσιν ἐπὶ τε τὰς κοινὰς πράξεις καὶ τὰς κατ' ἰδίαν περιπετείας, νῦν βούλομαι περὶ τούτου τοῦ μέρους διαστείλασθαι καθ' ὅσον ὁ τῆς πραγματικῆς ἱστορίας ἐπιδέχεται τρόπος. My translations of Polybius are based upon Paton (LCL).

fate>, I now wish to state my opinion on this subject as far as it is admissible to do so in a strictly historical work.

Polybius sets out to criticise those who ascribe public events to *tyche* (and fate). Fate is presumably an addition of the excerpter,³⁷ as it is rare in Polybius: it appears in only two passages (16.32.4, 18.54.11), in which it is used in the traditional sense of death.³⁸ Polybius, writing as a historian rather than a philosopher, may not have considered it necessary to give a definition of the notion of *tyche*; instead he tells us when it is appropriate to use the term. He distinguishes two kinds of causes: those that are impossible or difficult to discover and those that are not. With regard to the latter, for which discovery of the causes is possible, we should not make reference to *tyche* or the divine:³⁹

As for those events of which it is possible to discover the explanation, out of which and through which it came to happen, we should not, I think, put them down to the action of the divine.

With regard to the former kind of causes, those that are impossible or difficult to discover, Polybius offers a few examples, such as heavy rain or snow, destruction of crops, and the plague, which may have serious consequences upon the history of peoples. Referring to *tyche* here amounts to no more than “bowing to public opinion,” doing what is customary to do and attempting by prayer and sacrifice to appease the heavenly powers; we send to ask the gods what we must do and say, to set things right and cause the evil that afflicts us to cease.⁴⁰

³⁷ As acknowledged by L. Dindorf, T. Büttner-Wobst (eds.), *Polybios. Historiae* (Leipzig 1889–1905), and followed by translators such as D. Roussel, *Polybe. Histoire* (Paris 2003), and W. Kassies, *Polybios. Wereldgeschiedenis* (Amsterdam 2007).

³⁸ Cf. LSJ s.v. μοῖρα III.2.

³⁹ 36.17.4: ὧν δὲ δυνατὸν ἐστὶ τὴν αἰτίαν εὐρεῖν, ἐξ ἧς καὶ δι’ ἣν ἐγένετο τὸ συμβαῖνον, οὐχί μοι δοκεῖ τῶν τοιούτων δεῖν ἐπὶ τὸ θεῖον ποιεῖσθαι τὴν ἀναφορὰν.

⁴⁰ 36.17.3: ἰκετεύοντες καὶ θύοντες ἐξιλασκόμενοι τὸ θεῖον, πέμπομεν

Here Polybius presents *tyche* as a last resort, as the hesitant formulation, with which he begins the passage, makes clear: we “may perhaps be justified” in getting out of the difficulty by setting the cause of an event down to the action of *tyche*.⁴¹ Even with regard to this type of cause the reference to *tyche* is apparently only provisional: at some point it may be possible to find a better explanation than the simple reference to *tyche*. Polybius’s approach to *tyche* can thus be characterised as epistemological: if after serious research it has not been possible to find the causes of a particular event, reference to *tyche* can be made.

Some examples may help us to get a clearer view of Polybius’s position here. At 10.5.8 he criticises those who attribute causes simply to the gods and to various instances (or kinds of) *tyche*. Those people are either inferior, inexperienced, or lazy. With a little more experience and effort they would have been able to attribute the cause of public events to (human) reason, in the form of shrewdness, calculation, and foresight:⁴²

For those who are not able to have an accurate insight into the right timings, causes, and dispositions, either by the utter inferiority of nature or through inexperience and indolence, attribute to the [traditional] gods and to various instances of *tyche* the causes of what is accomplished through shrewdness and calculation and [human] foresight.

A second example occurs at 2.38.5, where Polybius explains the historical event of the Peloponnesians taking over the

ἐρησόμενοι τοὺς θεοὺς τί ποτ’ ἂν ἢ λέγουσιν ἢ πράττουσιν ἡμῖν ἄμεινον εἶη καὶ γένοιτο παῦλα τῶν ἐνεστώτων κακῶν.

⁴¹ 36.17.2: ὧν μὲν νῆ Δί’ ἀδύνατον ἢ δυσχερὲς τὰς αἰτίας καταλαβεῖν ἀνθρώπων ὄντα, περὶ τούτων ἴσως ἂν τις ἀπορῶν ἐπὶ τὸν θεὸν τὴν ἀναφορὰν ποιοῖτο καὶ τὴν τύχην.

⁴² οἱ γὰρ μὴ δυνάμενοι τοὺς καιροὺς μηδὲ τὰς αἰτίας καὶ διαθέσεις ἐκάστων ἀκριβῶς συνθεωρεῖν, ἢ διὰ φαυλότητα φύσεως ἢ δι’ ἀπειρίαν καὶ ῥαθυμίαν, εἰς θεοὺς καὶ τύχας ἀναφέρουσι τὰς αἰτίας τῶν δι’ ἀγχίνοιαν ἐκ λογισμοῦ καὶ προνοίας ἐπιτελουμένων.

political institutions as well as the name of Achaeans. Again, attributing this event to *tyche* is a sign of an epistemological defect, i.e. the lack of serious research on the matter:⁴³

it is clear that it would not be proper to say that it is the result of *tyche*, for that is inferior: it is proper to seek for a cause. For without a cause it is not possible for any event, whether in accordance with or against ordinary human reason, to be accomplished. The cause, in my opinion, is something like this ...

A third example can be found at 31.30.1–5, where Polybius explains that he paid attention to Scipio's education⁴⁴

so that the readers may not be at a loss because certain things have occurred in his subsequent life which appear astonishing, and may not, depriving the man himself of the credit of his perfect acts, put them down to *tyche* out of ignorance of the causes ...

This reductionist method is sometimes also employed by Polybius with regard to his own characterisations, in those cases where an event is “unforeseen” or “sensational.”⁴⁵ Here Polybius at first adheres to the common usage of *tyche*: an event at first appears to be unforeseen or sensational; but upon closer inspection its causal aspects may become clear.

In addition to this epistemological approach a different approach towards *tyche* can be found in the introduction of the *Histories*, where *tyche* is described as the active force in history.⁴⁶

⁴³ δῆλον ὡς τύχην μὲν λέγειν οὐδαμῶς ἂν εἴη πρόπον· φαῦλον γὰρ αἰτίαν δὲ μᾶλλον ζητεῖν. χωρὶς γὰρ ταύτης οὔτε τῶν κατὰ λόγον οὔτε τῶν παρὰ λόγον εἶναι δοκούντων οὐδὲν οἶόν τε συντελεσθῆναι. ἔστι δ' οὖν, ὡς ἐμὴ δόξα, τοιαύτη τις.

⁴⁴ πρὸς τὸ μήτε διαπορεῖν τοὺς ἀκούοντας διὰ τὸ παράδοξά τινα φανήσεσθαι τῶν συμβαινόντων μετὰ ταῦτα περὶ αὐτόν, μήτ' ἀφαιρουμένους τὰνδρὸς τὰ κατὰ λόγον γεγονότα κατορθώματα τῇ τύχῃ προσάπτειν, ἀγνοούντας τὰς αἰτίας ...

⁴⁵ See e.g. Walbank, *Commentary* I 18, *Polybius, Rise* 29; and esp. F. Frazier, “L'inattendu et l'extraordinaire. Les emplois de παράδοξος dans les *Histoires* de Polybe,” *Ktema* 27 (2002) 79–86.

⁴⁶ 1.4.1: τὸ γὰρ τῆς ἡμετέρας πραγματείας ἴδιον καὶ τὸ θαυμάσιον τῶν

For what is characteristic of my work, and what is most remarkable in our times, is this: just as *tyche* has guided almost all the affairs of the inhabited world in one direction and has forced them to incline towards one and the same end, so ...

A little further on he speaks again of *tyche* as an active force again, when he talks about “the performance of *tyche*,” which is “ever producing something new and playing a part in the lives of men.” He continues:⁴⁷

she has not in a single instance ever accomplished such a work, ever achieved such a triumph, as in our own times.

With some hesitation, as Polybius does not use the term, I suggest that we call this approach to *tyche* as the encompassing superior force that governs the universe the *physical* approach.⁴⁸

Polybius then discusses the specific role of the physical force in his day: it is a special feature of his time that the force takes a unifying course with regard to human beings, that is, the course in which the inhabited world is being unified under the rule of Rome. Different from earlier generations of historians⁴⁹

the historian should likewise bring before his readers under one synoptical view the operations by which *tyche* has accomplished her general purpose. Indeed it was this chiefly that invited and encouraged me to undertake my task.

καθ' ἡμᾶς καιρῶν τοῦτ' ἔστιν ὅτι, καθάπερ ἡ τύχη σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ τῆς οἰκουμένης πράγματα πρὸς ἓν ἔκλινε μέρος καὶ πάντα νεύειν ἠνάγκασε πρὸς ἓνα καὶ τὸν αὐτὸν σκοπόν.

⁴⁷ 1.4.4–5: παντελῶς ὑπέλαβον ἀναγκαῖον εἶναι τὸ μὴ παραλιπεῖν μηδ' ἐᾶσαι παρελθεῖν ἀνεπιστάτως τὸ κάλλιστον ἅμα δ' ὠφελιμώτατον ἐπιτήδευμα τῆς τύχης. οὐδέπω τοιόνδ' ἀπλῶς οὔτ' εἰργάσατ' ἔργον οὔτ' ἠγωνίσατ' ἀγώνισμα, οἷον τὸ καθ' ἡμᾶς. οὐδέπω τοιόνδ' ἀπλῶς οὔτ' εἰργάσατ' ἔργον οὔτ' ἠγωνίσατ' ἀγώνισμα, οἷον τὸ καθ' ἡμᾶς.

⁴⁸ Cf. P. Pédech, *La méthode historique de Polybe* (Paris 1964) 337–343, esp. 343 “puissance supérieure” and 339 n.37 “la croyance profonde de Polybe au gouvernement universel de la fortune.”

⁴⁹ 1.4.2: δεῖ διὰ τῆς ἱστορίας ὑπὸ μίαν σύνοψιν ἀγαγεῖν τοῖς ἐντυγχάνουσι τὸν χειρισμὸν τῆς τύχης, ᾧ κέχρηται πρὸς τὴν τῶν ὅλων πραγμάτων συντέλειαν. καὶ γὰρ τὸ προκαλεσάμενον ἡμᾶς καὶ παρορμηῆσαν πρὸς τὴν ἐπιβολὴν τῆς ἱστορίας μάλιστα τοῦτο γέγονεν.

Thus according to Polybius the task of the historian is to explain the role of *tyche* in relation to human beings in a particular time frame. More specifically, in his own time frame of the second century B.C. he understands his particular task to consist in explaining *tyche* as a force that brings about an organic whole in which human actions in the world have become connected. The character of contemporary history has thus changed from “sporadic” (*sporas*) to “to be interwoven” (*sumplekesthai*), as he formulates it (1.3.3–4).⁵⁰ According to Polybius, history is thus not in principle interwoven or universal: there were eras when it was not, and there may be (dark) times when it will become “sporadic” again.⁵¹ The force of *tyche* thus does not necessarily impose a unifying course upon the history of mankind. Whereas *tyche* as a force always brings about the organic unity of the world, this need not imply that the human actions in this world are necessarily interconnected.

The two approaches in Polybius from a Stoic perspective

To sum up the argument thus far: for the Stoics *tyche* has chiefly to do with man’s imperfect interpretation of particular events, which a perfect human being would be able to understand as parts of the ordered whole guided by reason. In what I called the epistemological approach, Polybius’s *tyche* functions as a last resort: if no explanation of an event can be found, it is admissible to refer to *tyche*. At the same time, in what I coined the physical approach, Polybius uses *tyche* to convey the point that the world is governed by an encompassing force and can hence be explained from the perspective of order, an order which had a special characteristic in his day related to one

⁵⁰ Cf. K. Clarke, *Between Geography and History* (Oxford 1999) 274; L. Pitcher, *Writing Ancient History* (London 2009) 116: “Universal history only begins to make sense during Rome’s rise to dominance.”

⁵¹ W. Siegfried, *Studien zur geschichtlichen Anschauung des Polybios* (Leipzig 1928) 20–21, in his typically idiosyncratic way makes the useful distinction here between two types of universal history, principled and contingent, arguing (as I do) that Polybius deals with the second type.

group of humans, the Romans, who dominated the order as a whole.

Three basic similarities between Polybius and the Stoics can now be discerned. First, for the Stoics as well for Polybius, the assumption is that the world is governed by an active principle or force.⁵² Second, in this order human beings occupy a special place, in that they are in principle capable of understanding the course of the force, and hence can act consciously in accordance with the order, as well as explain it.⁵³ It is up to its interpreter, whether philosopher or historian, to reveal its more specific causal aspects (and, incidentally, it is up to each human being to discover the course of this force—in order to live in consistency and to be happy). The introduction of the *Histories* is surely the best place to start in describing this encompassing force, which can then be unveiled in its causal aspects by the historian. Third, human understanding of these events is limited. Like the Stoics, Polybius did not consider himself to be in possession of perfect understanding, as we saw in his hesitant formulation at 36.17: “We may perhaps be justified” etc.⁵⁴ In other contexts as well this imperfect point of view is applied, as at 6.56.10, where Polybius makes clear that in contemporary society gods are needed, because human beings are not sages. (Incidentally, the implication here must be that in an ideal community of sages gods are superfluous.⁵⁵)

As non-sages, i.e. “inferior persons” (*phauloi*), human beings may sometimes be able to explain part of the process, and sometimes they may either misunderstand or remain baffled. Polybius as such an inferior person may thus be able to explain the rise of Rome’s power by (as one of its main causes) her

⁵² As Hirzel, *Untersuchungen* 868, already suggested.

⁵³ Cf. H. Erkell, *Augustus, felicitas, fortuna. Lateinische Wortstudien* (Göteborg 1952) 146: “Polybios ... durch und durch rationalistisch.”

⁵⁴ Cf. “the cause, in my opinion, is something like this” in 2.38.5, quoted n.43 above.

⁵⁵ Cf. K. Ziegler, “Polybios,” *RE* 21 (1952) 1440–1578, at 1539.

(mixed) constitution.⁵⁶ But in those cases where human beings are not able to explain a process (but only then, otherwise they will meet Polybius's contempt), they may fall back upon the general term and otherwise familiar notion of *tyche*.

It may be objected that, if Polybius refers to *tyche* as do the Stoics to divine reason, why does he not simply use that notion of "reason"? The answer must be that Polybius uses reason typically in the popular sense of fallible human reason, as attested in the passages in which the operations of *tyche* and the human understanding of these operations are contrasted, in the sense that they pass ordinary and hence imperfect human understanding. An example thereof we encountered above, in relation to 2.38.5.⁵⁷ Furthermore, if Polybius were to use reason in the different sense of cosmic force, this would clearly be philosophical. Polybius is not a philosopher, or at least he does not want to present himself as such. The expression "admissible in a strictly historical work" (36.17: see n.36 above) is a clear manifestation of this. Polybius rather seeks a common ground with his readers, speaking a more popular language, to whom he can say that he will offer them a better insight.

The conclusion is thus that Polybius's two approaches to *tyche* can be reconciled from a Stoic perspective. The perfectly rational human being or sage will be able to explain *tyche* as an active principle and understand the particular operations of the active principle that are his concern. But from the point of view of the inferior person, who will not always be able to understand the general course of events, such as Polybius or in fact any other human being, it *does* make sense to refer to *tyche* as

⁵⁶ See e.g. P. Shorey, "τύχη in Polybius," *CP* 16 (1921) 280–283, at 282; D. E. Hahn, "Kings and Constitutions: Hellenistic Theories," in C. Rowe, M. Schofield (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Political Thought* (Cambridge 2000) 457–476, at 464; A. Erskine, *Roman Imperialism* (Edinburgh 2010) 34.

⁵⁷ See n.43. The same contrast between *tyche* as a force going against one's rational expectations is at 1.86.7, 2.4.3–4, 2.36.7, 2.70.2, 4.2.4, 8.2.3, 8.20.10. See further J. Marincola, *Greek Historians* (Oxford 2001) 143–144.

the physical force that guides all, as certainly in the Hellenistic period it was customary to do. This is not to say that the inferior person should refrain from elucidating the particular operations of the active principle. This applies to the historian especially, such that only where elucidation of historical events is apparently impossible does this *epistemological* deficit justify the reference to *tyche*.⁵⁸

If these conclusions are correct, they also offer a clue to Polybius fr.83b. The Büttner-Wobst edition gives only the latter part; the full passage is *Suda* τ1234:⁵⁹

Tyche among the Greeks is an unforeseeable ordering of the world, or a movement coming from what is unclear and going to what is unclear and spontaneous; but we Christians agree that God governs the universe. And so does Polybius.

The author rejects the traditional Greek usage of *tyche*: for him ultimately no process or event is unforeseeable, unclear, or spontaneous. Rather, everything is part of a greater and divine scheme of things. In this sense, Polybius can be aligned not only with the Christian view that God governs all, but also with the similar Stoic view that the divine force of reason governs all. Note, at any rate, that the terminology here, “to govern the universe,” (*διοικεῖν τὰ πάντα*) is Stoic. This is not to say that there is no difference between Polybius and the Christian view: for the Stoics, as for Polybius, the force is immanent, whereas for Christians this force obviously is located outside the world in the form of the Creator of the world. (The view of *tyche* rejected by the author of the lexicon would thus be in line with the epistemological approach, and the view approved in line with the physical approach.)

⁵⁸ Here my interpretation is different from Darbo-Peschanski, *L'Historia* 302–308: while positing the Stoicism of Polybius's understanding of *tyche* as a single physical force, she does not interpret his references to *tyche* in relation to this epistemological deficit.

⁵⁹ *Τύχη· τύχη παρ' Ἑλλήσιν ἀπρονόητος κόσμου διοίκησις ἢ φορὰ ἐξ ἀδήλων εἰς ἀδηλον καὶ αὐτόματον, οἱ δὲ Χριστιανοὶ Θεὸν ὁμολογοῦμεν διοικεῖν τὰ πάντα. καὶ Πολύβιος φησι.*

In comparison with the early Stoics, Polybius clearly is less radical. For the early Stoics, only the truly virtuous person can live his life in accordance with reason, able to determine and follow its course; all those who cannot, live unhappy lives. The early Stoics took over this radicalism from their Socratic-Cynic intellectual ancestors. Like these ancestors, they were happy to promote these ideas in paradoxical fashion, by formulating doctrines such as “all mistakes are equal,” illustrated with metaphors such as whether one is one foot under the surface of the water or five hundred, one will drown anyway.⁶⁰ This radicalism seems to have been abandoned by later Stoics; or at least Stoics, such as Panaetius, who like Polybius were in the same arch-conservative Roman setting,⁶¹ put less stress on it. Traces of a Panaetian mitigated attitude can be found in Cicero’s *De officiis* and the *Laelius*, where moral behaviour is discussed in terms of “semblance of virtue” or “second order” virtue.⁶² When Polybius discusses Scipio’s “perfect acts” (*κατορθώματα*: n.44 above), a term applied to only the sage by the early Stoics, he may well have done so in the same second order way. Like Panaetius, Polybius seems to have sought common ground with his audience. A term used by Jonathan Barnes with regard to Aristotle’s method is particularly apt. As in the case of Aristotle Polybius’s method can be described as “endoxic”: he starts out using common beliefs or *doxai*, which are subsequently dealt with in a critical manner.⁶³ In terms of *tyche*, Polybius agrees with his audience that *tyche* is an

⁶⁰ E.g. Diog. Laert. 7.120 (*SVF* III 527).

⁶¹ See *Suda* π184 (Panaet. fr.8 Alesse, fr.A7 Vimercati) and π1941 (fr.28/A21); cf. frs.21–38/A20–37. On the “Scipionic circle” see e.g. R. Harder, “Die Einbürgerung der Philosophie in Rom,” *Die Antike* 5 (1929) 291–316, at 297–302; A. E. Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus* (Oxford 1967) 294–306; J. E. G. Zetzel, “Cicero and the Scipionic Circle,” *HSCP* 76 (1972) 173–179; E. Vimercati, *Il mediostoicismo di Panezio* (Milano 2004) 24–29.

⁶² E.g. *Off.* 1.46, 3.13–16, *Laelius* 18–19. See further Brouwer, *OSAPh* 23 (2002) 202–203.

⁶³ I owe the comparison with Aristotle to Alice van Harten.

important notion, as *tyche* in a way (as reason) guides our lives. But he then makes clear that particular events ordinarily explained on the basis of *tyche* can also often be better explained in terms of aspects of a grander scheme of things that is intelligible. In these cases, the blanket formula of *tyche* can only meet Polybius's contempt. Obviously this endoxic strategy, whether Panaetius's or Polybius's, worked far better among the conservative Roman elite, better at any rate than the more confrontational and purposively shocking "paradoxical" approach so typical of the early Stoics.

A further point: Polybius's acknowledgment of operating on the level of the inferior person is thus not necessarily a sign that he is an (Academic) sceptic:⁶⁴ as someone who is not a sage, but is making progress in discovering the course of *tyche* in the past, Polybius's explanation of the causal aspects of *tyche* is simply an honest attempt. On the level of the fallible human being, there is thus no need to differentiate between Stoics and sceptics or to describe Polybius as an (Academic) sceptic.

To return briefly to the comparison with Machiavelli with which I began: as pointed out by Russell Price, *fortuna* for Machiavelli can have three meanings: force, condition, and luck. Machiavelli's main concern, which he shared with most Italian humanists from Petrarch⁶⁵ to Alberti, as Quentin Skinner brilliantly showed, was virtue's conflict with *fortuna*.⁶⁶ Machiavelli compared virtue's conflict against *fortuna* with man's fight against a capricious woman (one of the common representations of *fortuna* in the Renaissance period). Leaving the invidious sexual metaphor aside, one which may well have started among the Roman Stoics,⁶⁷ for Machiavelli the first

⁶⁴ D. E. Hahm, "From Platonism to Pragmatism," *Apeiron* 35.4 (2002) 103–123.

⁶⁵ Cf. *De remediis utriusque fortune* 1.3: *quod illud est bellum ... quod cum fortuna gerimus? cuius nos facere poterat virtus sola victores*; 1.6: *duellum cum fortuna*.

⁶⁶ Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* 1 (Cambridge 1978) 120; cf. E. Garin, *Italian Humanism* (Oxford 1965 [1947]) 61.

⁶⁷ See e.g. Busch, in Maurach, *Seneca* 85–87; A. Niem, "Seneca. De

meaning of *fortuna* is thus force. Defeating *fortuna*, according to him, is possible by adapting one's character to *fortuna* in the sense of *gli tempi e le cose*, in which one sometimes operates best like a fox, sometimes like a lion. Here we find *fortuna* in the second meaning of condition. Doing so would have the result that one would always be fortunate or lucky, and this leads to *fortuna* in the third meaning. However, if one does not act properly against *fortuna* in alignment with time and place, one is confronted with a force that acts like a destructive river in human affairs, which shows its powers where no force has been organised to resist it.⁶⁸ In keeping with the river comparison Machiavelli suggests dykes and dams. (Modern engineers would agree, adding that the river should be allowed to flow more naturally.)

Similarly to what we encountered in Polybius, Machiavelli's distinct usages of *fortuna* are thus ultimately consistent. The similarity should not overshadow the main difference between Polybius and Machiavelli: for Machiavelli *fortuna* and virtue are separate forces operating on a similar level, whereas for Polybius (or the Stoics, for that matter) *tyche* cannot be defeated by virtue;⁶⁹ rather, the virtuous person will come to understand that *tyche* is but a name used for the part of divine reason not discovered by the inferior person, but in which the inferior person somehow participates and in this way determines his

providentia. Ein Kommentar" (diss. Osnabrück 2002) 122, who both refer to the etymological kinship between "vir" and "virtus."

⁶⁸ See Skinner, *Foundations* 95, 120; Q. Skinner, *Machiavelli. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford 2000) 31 ff.

⁶⁹ Pace T. Flanagan, "The Concept of Fortuna in Machiavelli," in A. Parel (ed.), *The Political Calculus* (Toronto 1972) 127–156, at 143, who contrasts Machiavellian *fortuna* and Stoic *tyche* as immanent and transcendent respectively. For both Machiavelli and the Stoics, force is something immanent, the difference being that whereas for Machiavelli one immanent force will have to defeat another immanent force, for the Stoics it is reason that is the one immanent force: *tyche* is simply used to refer to reason not (yet) grasped.

own life, or for that matter the course of history, whether unified under Rome's rule or not.⁷⁰

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