

THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

An eJournal published by the
College of Stoic Philosophers

Apr/May/Jun 2012: Issue #2

Editor's note: At the first Annual Marcus Aurelius Conference in San Diego, California, April 2010, many important ideas about Stoic philosophy were shared and discussed. One such idea was contained in a presentation by Dr. Tomasz Mazur of Poland. Tomasz said that the rationality of the Cosmos could be seen as a kind of mind. Dr. Brown isolated this thought, considered it at length, and wrote the following essay a month later. He has kindly given permission to have it printed here.

“The Conscious Cosmos”

by John B. Brown, MD,

Many atheist Stoics have disagreed with the ancient orthodox Stoic belief that the cosmos is a conscious, living entity. There are several ways the orthodox Stoic conception may be defended.

First, it would be important to understand that a false dualism may lie at the heart of the atheist objection to a conscious cosmos. If one is a strict materialist and naturalist, as most atheists are, then all observed things are material entities or epiphenomena of material entities, and that would include a mind, or any thing that is self aware and aware of its environment. To make a sharp distinction between animate and inanimate, conscious and unconscious, is to place a false dualism on what is more likely to be a continuum of state of being. Therefore, someone devoted to strict materialism ought to be very cautious about making absolute statements about the impossibility of the cosmos being conscious. Consciousness is obviously a property of some material entities such as ourselves. There is nothing necessarily unique about the state of being a human being. Being conscious is a material natural state. Once this is firmly grasped the argument concerning the consciousness of the cosmos may be moved from a discussion of some sort of supernatural spirit of the universe to the more congenial (to the atheist) discussion of deciding whether the cosmos exhibits the state or properties being discussed.

Second, it is important to discuss what is meant by "conscious". In medicine, consciousness exists in a continuum ranging from a fully functioning sense of self and environment, with appropriate responses to internal and external stimuli, to states of decreased responsiveness to external stimuli, such as pain or need for necessities of life like breathing or moving to avoid stasis injuries. Such a state of decreased consciousness can be confused with an inability to respond, such as is seen when a person is under the influence of paralytic medications but inadequate anesthesia and so cannot move or react to the activities of the surgeon but is acutely aware of the sensations of being cut and manipulated. We can, to some degree, measure the state of consciousness in such settings using devices like a BIS monitor or other detectors of brain activity. These are utilitarian measures which are really only valid in limited and particular situations.

In entities like ourselves, the fundamentals of consciousness seem to be awareness of self and of environment. We can know if an entity is conscious by how it reacts to environmental stresses, such as the need for food, sex, avoidance of pain, injury, or unsuitable environments, especially if these responses are willful (i.e., they can be trained, extinguished, etc.) It should be noted that we can observe life and limb-saving reflexive reactions even in unconscious people, or in decapitated animals whose spinal cord reflexes are still intact, or in the limbs of paralyzed people whose neurological control centers lie below the break in continuity with the central nervous system. A response which never varies may raise the question of whether or not there is consciousness behind it; whether there is a sense of self and a will present or whether the response is more like a natural law— invariant and untrainable. The cosmos exists only as itself and so has no environment in which it exists. How can we assess consciousness in an entity which is only itself and has no environment? Clearly, if we are to say anything about consciousness in something like the cosmos we need a new understanding.

When I imagine what is meant by a conscious cosmos, I think of awareness of self and rationality. Does a conscious entity need to be rational? No, as I can imagine an irrational conscious entity that acts in response to stimuli in ways which are contrary to the perceived ends of the conscious being's existence. Such an entity would, for example, enter more fully into a fire that is burning it rather than extract itself, or maybe not even react to being burned at all. However, the cosmos, if conscious, cannot be seen as irrational in this sense because of the independent nature of its existence. The cosmos is all that exists and is its own environment. To use the example above, there are no fires into which its cosmic body may be placed, and no thing to react to which is not itself, and no "space" into which a reaction may be observed that is not already itself. What we would instead observe is only changes in the state of the cosmos. A conscious cosmos would have to change over time as a minimum requirement.

This is a property we observe in our cosmos. These changes are regular and reflexive in that causes produce predictable effects, effects so precisely predictable that mathematical abstractions accurately model them to a high degree. If we posit an irrational but conscious cosmos, we would expect causality to not produce predictable effects. Is rationality the only possible explanation for this regularity? In a sense, it is. Rationality, reduced to its fundamentals, is always behaving according to one's nature, that is, to behave in accord with a strict set of rules of behavior. This is exactly what we observe in the universe around us. Can something be rational without being conscious? I think that if one is rigorous in avoiding dualistic conceptions about consciousness (i.e., that it involves some sort of spiritual entity or *élan vital*, etc.), one will conclude that rationality and consciousness in an entity like the cosmos must go together. For the strict materialist/naturalist the conscious mind of a man is the deterministic product of nature with the starting state of the universe. It is therefore just like any other natural process, albeit a very sophisticated one.

The ancient Greek Stoics thought about the cosmos in terms of analogy with man, an understanding that informed and grew out of their understanding of the continuum of existence and the animation of inert matter. They thought that it would be impossible that something unconscious could create consciousness, and that the state of being conscious was the higher state of being. It therefore seemed inconceivable to them that the Cosmos would be a lesser state of being than mankind. Our modern understanding is slightly different in that Darwin has provided a way for complex structures to self-assemble through evolution from less complex structures. and others about the logic of evolution. Out of basic laws of interaction come order in the universe. Things sort themselves out according to the laws of interaction and thermodynamics. To use the terminology of the Stoics, the interactions of fire and air define and move the state of the Cosmos in general and in particular. Out of this order comes complexity. The sorting and movement produces structures and states which did not exist before.

These states can and do vary slightly from each other, and interact with each other through the connectivity of the continuum. In essence, they cooperate and compete (*sympatheia*). Out of this competition and cooperation comes design. This is "design without a designer," to use the parlance of the new atheists. But does this

modern understanding which demands that there be no creator but only a blind watchmaker reflect a residual dualism which gives quasi supernatural status to any mind, rather than seeing mind, or rather consciousness, as a state of being in the universe of strict materialism? I think it does reflect such a dualistic understanding, and so can be dismissed as not being sufficiently materialistic and atheistic.

Biology has given us an important tool in evolution for understanding human consciousness. So, out of the complexity comes design. Out of the design comes mind—the consciousness of man, by which I mean a rational problem solving awareness of self and environment, an understanding which allows complex predictions and an understanding by analogy so we can make predictions of the future by abstractions rather than by direct experience. We can, in effect, make models of reality in our minds. Perhaps this is the distinct property of our minds that we have trouble imagining the Cosmos possesses. Can the Cosmos imagine a multitude of possible actions and choose among them, actualizing some of them and not others? If this is something the cosmos can do, then we are forced back to the irrational universe, the universe without causality. I think it is inappropriate to imagine the conscious Cosmos in this way, and so we need not seek this modeling behavior in the Cosmos in order to determine if it has the property of consciousness. So, how can we understand the idea of consciousness in an entity like the cosmos?

As already discussed, the consciousness of the Cosmos must be different in several ways from the consciousness of man. We have a consciousness which exists within an external environment which, while not part of us is connected to us. The Cosmos has no environment that is not self. We are able to model certain possible actions and their consequences in our abstracting minds and choose between the possibilities. The Cosmos cannot do this and remain rational. It exists in a realm where possibility and actuality are identical. This is not a deficiency in the Cosmos. It is not that the Cosmos is less than man, but more. The Stoics knows that when one does not allow that which is outside himself to matter to himself, he renders himself beyond harm. *The Cosmos lives in this state of Stoic perfection by its very nature as a necessity of its existence* [ed. emphasis].

We can therefore conclude that the Cosmos is a conscious entity because it is rational (predictable, law following, internally interacting, showing the qualities of law-order-complexity-design-mind in its internal operations). The Stoics thought that we could have confidence in the beneficence of the cosmos because of its consciousness, and that by joining ourselves with its operations we would fulfill our purpose (*teleos*). This concept of the living cosmos has real meaning if we understand that there is divine Logos (laws) which has created all this vast world of which we are a part, and if we choose to act in accord with this Logos rather than with some other false abstraction we will experience the *eudaimonia* which marks a life well lived. Experientially many people have found that living in this way, the way of the Stoic Sage, actually does give eudaimonia.

Objections

•Why does the Cosmos have to be conscious to have all these attributes? Why can it not just be a big machine of unconscious parts, unconscious itself?

The answer lies in revisiting the idea of the dualistic vision of consciousness and to remind oneself of the Stoic idea of the continuum and that mind in man is a materialistic entity itself. To use an analogy, the idea of a “machine” is just the ditch on the opposite side of the dualistic road from the ditch of the idea of “spirit” or “animism”. It is a false dichotomy.

•How can a mind exist without a brain, and where is the brain of the cosmos?

I think this represents a misunderstanding the nature of the Cosmos. We humans can posit many

possible abstractions and have highly reactive brain mechanisms to deal with a complex environment. The Cosmos is its own environment and has only one reality. There is no need for a vast machinery of reactivity and abstraction. The Cosmos is all that is, and there is no need of a brain as there is no need for the functions of a brain. Where brains were needed within the Cosmos the laws of nature created order, which created complexity, which created design, which created brains out of which our minds emerged. Those minds were created in the initial conditions of the universe interacting with the underlying laws of existence, and therefore reflect and are part of the consciousness of the cosmos as discussed above.

•Aren't these sorts of statements easily misunderstood as promoting a transcendent God with whom we need to have a personal relationship, give sacrifice to, propitiate with worship, etc?

The Stoics speak of hymning and praising God for what he is. Isn't it better to see the universe as dead and us as alive even if it promotes a little dualism? The answer is—No. We must face reality as it is. One cannot be a good atheist and be a dualist. Stoicism is not for the weak. The possibility of sloppy thinking about the real nature of the conscious cosmos, of “god,” does not mean that we must stop thinking.

Also, the Stoics took a more charitable view of these mistaken transcendent ideas. They saw the reality behind Zeus and the gods, behind the acts of worship, sacrifice and prayer – that the divine Logos produces states which can be understood by analogy with anthropomorphic projections, and that an attitude of thankfulness and dependence on the divine Logos is a more perfect conformity with nature than living as if one were autonomous. We live in a continuum, not in discrete micro-universes which need not take others into account. To know piety is to understand the nature of relationships and to recognize the claims of the the “other” on us, and, in the end, to know the ultimate illusion of otherness and self.

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Dr. Brown enjoys amateur radio, bicycling, blogging, reading philosophy, and all things scientific, with a special interest in paleontology and molecular biology. He is an emergency room physician practicing medicine in Moscow, Idaho. He is a former Mentor at the College of Stoic Philosophers.