

# THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

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***IN THIS ISSUE** we have two articles for your consideration. First, we have several “Elevator Speeches” written by Mentors of the College of Stoic Philosophers. An elevator speech is mostly an American concept and follows our inclination to be in a hurry, our time-is-money compulsion. But, it does have a practical value. As often happens when people hear you are a Stoic and they ask what that means, what do you say? It's not likely they want a long explanation. Sometimes they only asked to be polite, and if your answer takes more than a couple of minutes you may see their eyes glaze over. The elevator speech is meant to pitch an idea or product for about as long as it takes you to ride an elevator a couple of floors. Therein lies the source of the name.*

*The second article, “The Big Tent,” is the main feature of this issue and deals with an increasingly persistent inquiry from some members of the Stoic community about whether or not we should be organized as a religion. They point out, correctly, that classical Stoicism had all the essential doctrine needed for it to be a religion, and they ask if we should consider this step in our evolution as a community? “The Big Tent” explores this idea, including some of the potential problems.*

## The Elevator Speech

by members of the College Faculty

### **Mark Karet:**

Stoicism is a philosophy of true freedom. It is an antidote for the modern world's synthetic freedom found in the dominate consumer culture of wanting, empty achievement and meaningless display. Stoicism offers freedom from fear, anger and craving through a focused attention to and awareness of the contents of our consciousness. It allows us to calm the ceaseless discourse in our heads that wavers between worried memories of the past and nervous anticipation of the future. Stoicism teaches us that we can and must take an active role in ordering & directing our thoughts. It teaches us that we can change our beliefs and thus change our ways of thinking and acting in our daily lives.

But, Stoicism also teaches that we must do so, without ever losing site of the essential truth that very little in life is up to us. What is not up to us? Everything that we cannot absolutely control is not up to us. If we pin our happiness on things we cannot control, we are dooming ourselves to a life completely dependent on luck.

What is up to Us? Only our thoughts, our will, our desires, our aversions and our actions. Ultimately these things are our choices. What should we choose? What guidance does Stoicism offer us? Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, said that the goal in life is to "Live in Accordance with Nature." What did he mean by this? He meant that humans should live up to their highest potential as reasoning beings and become virtuous persons. So in other words, being a good person results in a good flow of life and is ultimately the only source of true happiness.

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**Paul Lanagan:**

The Stoic seeks to look at life without flinching. The things around us are divided into two categories: things up to us and things not up to us. The Stoic focuses on those things up to us because they know that this is where a happy life can be found.

What is up to us? Our opinions, our intentions, and our desires. If we see things as they are, act unselfishly and justly and accept external events then we will live a good life. To do this we must develop those character strengths that are respected by all human societies: courage, self control, wisdom and fairness. This takes constant hard work and practice but the rewards are great.

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**Manolo Trueba:**

Stoicism is an ancient but still fully valid philosophy of life, which can provide you with the necessary tools for the difficult times we must live. Stoicism helps you to understand your place in a relentless universe where everything is beautifully connected by Fate. At the same time, it shows you the infinite amount of freedom that dwells in your soul. It teaches you how to think smartly, taking care of the things that depend on you and learning to accept the others. Once its teachings are assimilated, you naturally commit yourself to the best possible purpose in life—to become a better person. And, in so doing, you put yourself in the safest and quickest highway towards happiness.

\* \*

**Chris Fisher:**

Stoicism is a practical, lived philosophy aimed at creating a flourishing life. Its only maxim encourages us to “live according to Nature” by seeking excellence in our character and accepting our place within the divine order of the cosmos. Stoicism points the way to peace of mind and tranquility of soul by teaching us to discern and accept what is within our control and what is not. The practice of Stoicism helps us find spiritual meaning, without kicking our rational nature to the curb. Modern science often ignores our innate spiritual longing by reducing the universe to purely mechanistic processes, devoid of meaning. Religion often condemns our innate rational nature by reducing us to servile worshipers of transcendent divinity. Stoicism restores the natural balance between these human endeavors. Thus, Stoicism is a way of life which combines rational inquiry into the cosmos and human nature, with the spiritual insight derived from attending to the innate longing of our soul—our portion of divine Nature.

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**Elijah Ali:**

*I give the following speech probably two or three times a day, on average, which probably has something to do with my office walls being covered with quotes from the Stoic teachers of antiquity. All-in-all, I receive good feedback and continuous conversation.*

**Q:** What is Stoicism?

**A:** Stoicism is a way of life, an ethical practice which teaches one how to live in agreement with nature and how to establish a balanced, stable, and composed life, regardless of what is happening around them, through the cultivation of wisdom, courage, justice and self-restraint. The ultimate goal of this way of life is threefold:

1. To live in agreement with Nature,
2. To develop human excellence in character,
3. To live a thriving/prosperous life.

**Q:** What is a Stoic?

**A:** A Stoic is one who practices how to live in agreement with nature, how to develop excellent character, and how to live a balanced and prosperous life. If you have any questions please feel free to email, or check out the New Stoa website (pointing to the website on my card).

The questions I get most of the time in order of how often I get them:

1. Where does Jesus fit into this?
2. Do you believe in heaven? What happens to you when you die?
3. Are you a Buddhist? ( LOL)
4. Well, how is this Stoicism working out for you?
5. Are there any Stoic classes around here?

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**Erik Wiegardt:**

*My elevator speech is based upon a mneme (a memory work) I say every morning to start my day. It is a radical synthesis of what I remember from the Discourses of Epictetus, abbreviated, "The DOE."*

"The DOE"

One rule to unite us:

*live in agreement with Nature.*

Two maxims to guide us:

*Good is virtue that evil lacks;*

*all the rest is indifferent.*

*Good and evil are in the will;*

*only will is in our power.*

Three studies abide us:

*Judgments and the inner discourse,*

*Desires and the rising passions,*

*Actions and the noble duties.*

Hear the sage inside us:

*practice, practice, practice, practice*

*When asked about Stoicism, I start with the Stoic motto, then go directly to what is in our power and what is not in our power. After that, if time remains, I briefly touch on the three studies of a Stoic—logic, physics, and ethics—and how they relate to the fourth part, which is to practice, what every Stoic does after learning theory.*

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**Marije van Wieringen:** *[editor] With remarkable brevity, Marije was able to clearly describe the life of the Stoic prokopton in a single sentence:*

“A Stoic struggles to find happiness through becoming a good person.”

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## The Big Tent

by Erik Wiegardt

*Erik Wiegardt is the Founder of New Stoa and Scholarch of the College of Stoic Philosophers. He is the author of several eBooks on Stoicism that are freely available at the College library. He lives in San Diego, California, where he works full time for the Stoic community.*

If you want to start an argument bring up politics or religion. This is as true in the Stoic community as elsewhere, and after many years of conversations with individual Stoics I have learned that our people can be libertarians or socialists and atheists or theists. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on the subject of religion and leave political persuasion for another time.

Let's start at the beginning. The Stoic community, not unlike nature itself, exists on a continuum of opposites. This should not come as a surprise to anyone. As we know from Heraclitus and particle physicists *everything* in our familiar world is on a continuum.

*God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger, but he takes various shapes, just as fire, when it is mingled with spices, is named according to the aroma of each.*

Heraclitus fragment #36 (Burnet trans.)

*...[we live in] a universe of things that are always defined in terms of their opposites: light and darkness, hot and cold, positive and negative, male and female, good and evil.... Indeed, polarity is the very basis of creation. You cannot have created things without it.*

*The God Theory, Bernard Haisch (Weiser Books, 2006, p. 116)*

In antiquity, those who followed our school were almost without exception Stoics of the theistic kind. There was one known exception. According to John Sellars in *Stoicism* (California, 2006, p. 94-5) only Boethus of Sidon thought that the cosmos was a living being, but he considered it to be an unconscious vegetative process, not one that was conscious and benevolent. He is the only Stoic of antiquity who *may* have been an atheist; the others we can describe as theists, those who believe in God.

But now we have a problem. And, in order to deal with it we must first define our terms. In fact, we must clarify three defining issues from antiquity: were the Stoics theists or deists, were they polytheists or monotheists, and were they pantheists or panentheists?

Whether classical Stoics were theists or deists will be clear in the end, but it can be difficult to explain. First we have to know the difference. Any good dictionary will help, but the confusion this time comes from contemporary scholars, not from the Stoics of antiquity. Deists do not rely on myth, superstition,

revelation, or faith; theists do. For example, the Biblical Yahweh speaking to Moses from a burning bush would be part of the mythology of the Semitic faiths. By way of contrast, the deist god is a philosophical god, and our kinship to it is through the faculty of reason. That seems clear enough, right? Wrong.

Even Stoicisms' great scholar A.A. Long calls them deists in one reference and theists in another. In the *Cambridge Companion* (page 391) he says, "...the Stoics were eudaimonists, determinists, *deists*, and defenders of the claim that human reason can have incorrigible access to the basic principles of reality." Elsewhere he says they were *theists*. When Jules Evans was Associate Editor of the *Registry Report* he interviewed Long for issue #13, December 2008. In that issue, Jules asked him if he thought Stoicism was appropriate as a contemporary life philosophy. Long said, "The theism has to go. You could reinterpret it, so that when Stoics talk about God, you could instead talk about perfect rationality."

Not long after that interview, I wrote an email asking Long about the discrepancy between his *Registry Report* comment and his reference to Stoics as deists in his *Cambridge Companion* article. He never wrote back, so I emailed John Sellars, the author I mentioned earlier, and asked him the same question. He explained why most scholars say classical Stoics were theists. Here's the reason. Deism as a term was not invented until the Age of Enlightenment by the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century deists of England and northern Europe. So, to call the Stoics of antiquity deists would be *historically* inaccurate, which scholars are loathe to be. *But*, he assured me, in terms of our philosophical *principles* it would be more accurate to say they were, indeed, **deists**.

Next, an easy one. Every now and then the polytheism issue comes up, and the classical Stoics themselves can be blamed. They often referred to "the gods," plural, as if they were referring to the Greek/Roman pantheon of many gods, such as Zeus/Jupiter, Aphrodite/Venus, Ares/Mars, et cetera. Diogenes Laertius clarifies the situation once and for all. "[God is] the artificer of the universe and, as it were, the father of all, both in general and in that particular part of him which is all-pervading, and which is called many names according to its various powers (D.L. VII. 147. Zeno)." He then goes on to describe the various powers of Zeus and the names and regions of the *one* God. So, Stoics are **monotheists**. One God.

For the last issue, pantheism or panentheism, we return to the same passage by Diogenes Laertius (VII. 147. Zeno). "The deity, [Stoics] say, is a living being, immortal, rational, perfect or intelligent in happiness, admitting nothing evil [into him], taking providential care of the world and all that therein is, but he is not of human shape." In the next passage (148), D.L. says, "The substance of God is declared by Zeno to be the whole world and the heaven, as well as by Chrysippus in his first book *Of the Gods*, and by Posidonius in his first book with the same title." Throughout contemporary literature on Stoicism there appears to be a consensus that Stoics were pantheists, all god.

In *Hellenistic Philosophy* (California, 1986, p. 150) A.A. Long says, "Fundamentally, Stoic theology is pantheist." Then, in the *Cambridge Companion* (p. 368), he says, "...[But] the Stoics talk about the world in ways that imply it to be conceptually distinct from God or Nature. Spinoza does not do this..." Long was comparing Stoic pantheism with Spinoza's pantheism. So are we pantheist (pan-all, theist-god) or are we panentheist (pan-all, en-in, theist-god)?

Frankly, I prefer panentheism for the very simple reason that I think it is a mistake to *limit* the Stoic god to the parameters of human conception and definition. It may not be orthodox, and it will surely annoy contemporary reductionists, but everything I see in our familiar world gives evidence to the old saying, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Admittedly, what I can see and grasp exists

within a rather small fragment of the universe, so in order for me to believe that this old saying also applies to God requires some extrapolation. I don't have any trouble taking that leap, but if you do, and you prefer to hold firmly to orthodox belief (according to contemporary scholars), then we are **pantheists**.

There we have it. Classical Stoicism, with rare exceptions, perhaps only one, taught **Deism, Monotheism, and Pantheism**. Even today, these remain the core beliefs of the more devout, those who are by inner necessity the most spiritually inclined among us. However, as stated earlier, we have within the Stoic community a continuum of belief, and this continuum includes atheists, agnostics, deists, and theists. It truly is a big tent.

So, how are we all going to get along? Well, we *are* Stoics, after all, and we have been getting along reasonably well as a community for the past 18 years. *But, things may be about to change*. For the past four years some members, specifically those who follow the deist orthodoxy of antiquity, are suggesting we acknowledge the religious aspect of our philosophy and organize as a religion. We could, certainly, but why should we? Actually, there may be some practicality in doing so.

The Humanists, with membership estimated in the millions worldwide, accept the fact that human beings have always celebrated certain rites of passage, such as weddings, funerals, and religious feast and community days. And, they admit, we are stronger and happier for it. The Humanists of America, who I've repeatedly heard are about 99% atheist, have organized to have Humanist chaplains in the US Army. There may be no atheists in foxholes, as the saying goes, but the humanist disagree and believe they have a right to be there to bring comfort to atheists when in need (*LA Times*, "The Army recognizes humanists in the foxholes," April 25, 2014). What about Stoic chaplains? Do we need chaplains for weddings, funerals, and foxholes?

There is a significant portion of our community who claim atheism, maybe as much as 25%, a rough guess, but perhaps we should reexamine what that means. Not only are Humanists considering the practical value of having atheist chaplains, but there is also one organized religion of long standing who is atheistic at its core: Buddhism. There is no God, no supreme being of any kind in Buddhism, a fact that causes some to object that it is not really a religion at all (*NY Times*, "What does Buddhism require?" April 27 2014). But, they are still able to serve in a religious capacity.

Even a Hindu can be an atheist, According to Sarasvati Chennakesavan, Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus), Sri Venkateswara University and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society, London.

Hinduism...can be interpreted as both a way of life and a view of life. This is something like the Greek conception of religion. For them, too, Hellenism was a both a way of life and a view of life. From this it can be partially understood why there are so many faiths and beliefs that parade under the name of Hinduism. A good Hindu can be anything from a pantheist to an atheist. *A Critical Study of Hinduism* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1980), p. 5.

The Stoic community can and *should be* a big tent. We are tolerant of libertarians and socialists, and we can be tolerant of atheists and theists. There can and should be three agreements that all Stoics, regardless of personal belief, can understand and appreciate. Each of these concepts are taken directly from Diogenes Laertius' classical work, *The Lives of Eminent Philosophers* on the life of Zeno:

1. The Stoic motto: The goal of life is to live in agreement with nature (D.L.VII. 87). Can anyone deny our motto and still *be* a Stoic?
2. God is nature; Nature is our God (ibid., 85). \*\*\* Whatever it means to you. Whether you believe with Boethus of Sidon that nature is an unconscious and vegetative process, or that

Nature is conscious and providential, you are still a Stoic.

3. *Oikeiosis*: ethical evolution from self love to altruism (ibid., 148-9). This foundation of our whole ethical system is rooted in our physics and shows us why we can and should be good with or without God.

Within these three agreements, atheists, agnostics, deists, and theists can find their own way according to their individual beliefs and needs. If atheistic Humanists can have chaplains, we can too. If atheistic Buddhists can perform weddings and funeral ceremonies, we can too. Are we less tolerant than those who have already shown us the way? We shouldn't want anyone in our community to leave our big tent. We can and should continue to respect and support one another. After all, we are Stoics.

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\*\*\* Often considered one of the greatest political documents ever written, the American *Declaration of Independence* was written by the deist, Thomas Jefferson, with minor editing by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, then signed by all. I have included the first paragraph of that document. Note the phrase emphasized in bold letters. Also note that nature is spelled with a capital "N."

#### THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

IN CONGRESS, July 4, 1776.

**The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America,**

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the **Laws of Nature and of Nature's God** entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

*[editor] Many thanks to the great memory of the Marcus Fellow, Timo Koivusalo, a native of Finland, for pointing out the deistic wording in the American Declaration of Independence.*

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