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Is the Cosmos Conscious and Providential?

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The orthodoxy of the Society of Epictetus states:

There is only one requirement, one concept upon which we all agree: *The Stoic philosophical system includes a Cosmos which is conscious and providential*. This is the teaching of Epictetus and all classical Stoics and is our ancient tradition in the world.¹

Let me say a few things about this by way of introduction. First, I will treat these as two separate claims: (1) that the cosmos is conscious, and (2) that the cosmos is providential. These claims are logically separable², and it will be simpler to consider them one at a time. Second, the choice of these tenets must have been a compromise between several considerations: paying faithful homage to classical Stoicism, while keeping the tenets sufficiently abstract and nebulous that they admit of several possible interpretations, in order to enlarge the tent of Stoicism at least slightly, and for the organization to present itself as accepting of disagreement, criticism, multiple interpretations, and ways of practicing Stoicism. One can believe the universe is conscious and providential in different ways, for different reasons, and while accepting or rejecting many other tenets of Stoicism.

To remain plausible and defensible, we occasionally have to prune back the beliefs of the classical Stoics. (Epictetus thought that you could read omens from the flight of birds, but no one believes that anymore.) One of Stoicism's greatest virtues — both ancient and contemporary — is our intellectual courage. Does this same virtue condemn other Stoic commitments?

¹SocietyOfEpictetus.org. Accessed 11/7/16.

²It is clear that a thing could be conscious without being providential, in the way that a cat or a serial killer is conscious without being providential. It is less clear, and perhaps impossible, for a thing to be providential without being conscious.

The commitments that the universe is conscious and providential seem, at first glance, threatened by the scientific and naturalistic worldview that is increasingly the choice of atheists and secular humanists. To say the universe is conscious — and especially to say that it is *looking out for us* — sounds uncomfortably close to theism.³ Does the Society of Epictetus risk alienating its atheist or secular adherents? To what extent has Stoic orthodoxy survived and persisted through the advancement of cosmology, science, and philosophy? This paper considers whether either of the above tenets remains plausible or defensible in light of our best contemporary understanding of the world.

§1 Is the universe conscious?

§1.1 What should we mean by ‘conscious’?

It is notoriously difficult to say what we mean by consciousness. Philosophy of mind has been haunted by the “hard” problem of explaining how consciousness arises from matter and it is sometimes seen to be the chief merit of novelists to communicate the seemingly ineffable experience of the world through mere language. Says David Foster Wallace in *The Pale King*, “How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it’s just words.”

What should we say about what consciousness is? The popular conceptions that float around philosophy of mind will have to do. I am not a philosopher of mind; I cannot furnish anything more informative or descriptive. But I do think that these common descriptions capture some widely shared, central intuitions about the nature and value of consciousness. Any satisfying view of consciousness should have to meet these two criteria.

First, there is something *special* about consciousness. Conscious things are seen as responding to stimuli, at least, and more sophisticated forms of consciousness involve a “what it’s like,” or a first-personal experience that is not fully captured by a third-personal scientific way of describing the motions of a body or the chemical reactions in my brain. I can be in pain, but my experience of being in pain is not identical to or explicable in terms of saying that my “group C nerve fibers are firing.” This is one *biological correlate* of experiencing pain, but it is not the same thing as *experiencing pain*. Philosophers of mind call these sensations, these “what it’s like”s, *qualia*: smelling a rose or seeing the color red are other classic examples. The existence of qualia is controversial among philosophers of mind, but I will take their existence for granted.

Second, not just *anything* is conscious. Consciousness is a property that distinguishes some things from others. We typically do not think of rocks or air as being conscious in the same way, with the same sophistication, or to the same extent that humans like you or I are conscious. To avoid begging the question against Stoicism with this claim, let’s at least say that not everything that exists is *equally* or *similarly* conscious.

I will consider the two arguments that the cosmos is conscious that, as of Fall 2016, were

³Brown is clever to argue, however, that (1) *all* atheists would accept that humans are conscious, and (2) *most* atheists would accept that humans are strictly material entities; so most atheists would accept that (3) some strictly material entities can be conscious. Atheists err in dismissing out of hand the idea that the cosmos could be conscious *merely* because it is a strictly material entity.

assigned as part of the first installment in the Marcus Aurelius seminar. These arguments come from John Brown, MD⁴ and David Cain⁵. This piece is best read as a response to theirs.

Notice that these are not the only views of consciousness we might take. We might think of consciousness as a binary property that admits of complications, facets, or depth. Perhaps entities, all the way down to ants and bacteria, have a consciousness that is richer or simpler, more or less sophisticated, more or less vivid. Take another example of a binary property in nature that admits of multiple kinds: Almost all animals are *mobile* (and Aristotle took this *motive soul* to be characteristic of animals).⁶ But mobility comes in different kinds. Some animals are more agile or faster than others, some animals can swim and some animals can fly. These are different capacities that complicate, deepen, or extend the mobility of these animals. Still, all of these animals are mobile for the simple fact that they have the capacity to move themselves.

We might say the same about consciousness: we might conceive of it as a binary property: that almost all animals are conscious, down to ants and bacteria, though consciousness is complicated, deepened, or extended by different capacities in different animals. Some animals are self-conscious; some can operate on mentally abstract objects; some can project themselves into the future; some can represent the world in language; some can feel emotions like *schadenfreude* and *lacrimae rerum*. Many cannot, but that is because their consciousness is simpler. It merits investigation whether *this* is the kind of consciousness that the cosmos might have. Because Brown and Cain don't have this kind of consciousness in mind, though, I will have to leave that investigation for another time.

§1.2 Brown's argument that the universe is conscious

Brown gets a lot right. He is right that consciousness must be some kind of continuum — many properties in nature, like mass, color, and hunger, fall along smooth continua, rather than existing as sharp binary distinctions. Consciousness is one of these. While some things are clearly conscious (like humans) and some things are clearly not (like rocks), it is plausible to say that, *among conscious things*, some of them are *more* conscious than others. To be more precise, we should say that their consciousness is *deeper*, *richer*, or *more sophisticated*. Humans and cats are both conscious, though humans have a richer or deeper consciousness. Brown also notes that the medical profession accepts that consciousness falls along a continuum within one and the same being — one and the same being may be more or less conscious at various times. I may not seem conscious when I am asleep, for example, but if you tickle my nose with a feather and I instinctively swat at my face, then there is something to be said for that.

Brown appreciates that the cosmos cannot have the same consciousness that humans and other animals enjoy. We often say that humans and other animals are conscious if they

⁴John Brown, 2010. "The Conscious Cosmos." Available from http://societyofepictetus.org/show_PDF/ConsciousCosmos. Accessed 11/7/16.

⁵David Cain, 2011. "Of Course the Universe is Conscious." Available from <http://www.raptitude.com/2011/07/of-course-the-universe-is-conscious/>. Accessed 11/7/16.

⁶The Stoics famously said that a person drowning at sea is drowning whether they are a mile from shore or five feet from shore. We would not say that one of these people is drowning *more* than the other. Drowning seems to be a binary property that also admits of different degrees or facets.

respond to external stimuli, “especially if those responses are willful (i.e., they can be trained, extinguished, etc.)” However, the cosmos cannot in principle respond to external stimuli, since all stimuli will be *internal* to it. Second, it’s not obvious that the responses of the cosmos can be “trained, extinguished, etc.” — trained and extinguished by whom? Does this imply an ability for us to change — to train or extinguish — the laws of nature? This conception won’t do.

If the universe is to be conscious, it must be conscious in a way that does not require awareness. Is it right to call this *un-aware*, yet *reliable* reaction to stimuli “consciousness”? This already threatens to deflate our idea of consciousness so far as to make it unremarkable. If consciousness means an entity’s ability to respond to stimuli, then a rock that shatters in a landslide is conscious. If consciousness means an entity’s ability to respond to external stimuli *that derives from some internal principle of motion* or reaction, then plants have this kind of consciousness. However, neither rocks nor plants are conscious in an interesting way. If this is the way that the cosmos is conscious — if the universe were conscious in the way that I am “conscious” when I am asleep, or the way that a plant is “conscious” when it grows — then this is not interesting. The most interesting element of consciousness — specifically, the first-personal character of experience — has been removed. In fact, this seems to be a natural criticism of the Stoic doctrine that the cosmos is conscious: If it is conscious, it must be conscious in a way that is not special or interesting in the way that *our* consciousness is. Upon investigation, the point becomes less remarkable.

Here is Brown’s ultimate view of the cosmos’s consciousness:

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).

So, if a thing is rational (i.e. rule-guided) and responsive to stimuli, then it is conscious. However, this view has at least two problems. First, it is unsatisfyingly broad, as mentioned above. If this view is right, then mechanical clocks are conscious. They are clearly rule-guided and behave in reliable ways. They also respond to stimuli, as when I wind a clock and send its pendulum swinging. But mechanical clocks are not plausibly conscious, so this view is probably too broad to be interesting. Second, there seems to be a tension between being purely rule-guided and being “responsive” to stimuli in a way that is interesting. The behavior of billiard balls is rule-guided, mechanistic, and perfectly predictable. Yet it is *precisely because* of these features that we hesitate to call billiard balls conscious. They can be affected, sure enough, but *responsiveness* presumes something deeper.⁷ Otherwise, any mechanistic system in the universe — from bacteria to plants to stars — would be conscious. Brown seems to beg the question in favor of the Stoic, claiming that any mechanical system

⁷This raises the much thornier question of whether a conscious creature in a deterministic universe could *deliberately* respond to stimuli, or whether their consciousness would be more appropriately characterized as epiphenomenal. Though Brown seems to rule this out: “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.” If this is right, then it also raises the question of how humans can be rational, if determinism is true, and yet we are able to actualize some outcomes rather than others. The Stoics believed all three are true of humans. Brown denies that all three could be true of the cosmos.

is, by definition, conscious. But that is clearly too quick, and reduces consciousness to something unremarkable and undifferentiated from the purely mechanical operation of any rule-based system.⁸

§2.1 Cain's argument that the universe is conscious

Cain's argument that the cosmos is conscious uses an analogy to the awareness that a human has—and this is fitting since the Stoics explicitly compared the universe to a biological organism. What can we learn about the consciousness of the universe by observing our own consciousness?

Cain points out—correctly—that some part of us is conscious of another part. Our mind, our soul, our brain—whatever you prefer—is conscious of other parts of us, for example, when my stomach is upset, when I stub my toe, or when I scratch an itch. In these cases, we often say that *I* am aware of a pain or a pleasure.

Cain uses this analogy to argue that the universe itself is conscious: We could say that some part of the universe is conscious of another part, just as some part of us is conscious of another part. But notice that when we speak about ourselves, we drop the mention of parts and wholes, and say simply that *I* am conscious. Why not, then, drop this language when speaking of the universe and say that *it* is conscious?

The problem here, it seems to me, is that when speaking about ourselves being conscious, we are speaking elliptically—leaving out important details, or glossing over cumbersome talk about parts and wholes. We do this when we simply say that *we* are conscious. If we were being maximally precise, though, it would be more appropriate to speak in terms of parts. And as Stoics, it seems to me that we have good reason to be maximally precise. Loose talk should be avoided, I suggest, especially if we are interested in providing the most philosophically rigorous defense of a controversial idea. A skeptic might rightly ask of Cain: “You have told me that *part* of the cosmos is conscious. Well, which part is it?” Cain would have to reply, “Well, you and me.” The skeptic would understandably be disappointed.

Suppose there is a universe with one conscious person in it. If I ask, “How many conscious things are there?” There seem to be three possible responses: we can say that the human is conscious, or the cosmos is conscious, or both. But some of these descriptions are better than others. Unless, I am begging the question, there are not two conscious things, so saying that both of these things is conscious would be double-counting. Of the remaining answers, it seems more natural to say that (just) the one person is conscious.

Some of the parts of the cosmos are round and other parts are square. Should we say that the cosmos *itself* is round or square? It cannot be both—in fact, it is precisely to avoid contradictions like these that talk of parts and wholes is introduced. This way of talking countenances contradictions, which seems to violate even the most minimal requirement of philosophical inquiry. On the other hand, if we try to resolve these contradictions in favor of one property or the other, we run into other problems: Lots of the cosmos is un-conscious; in fact, surely *almost all* of its parts are un-conscious. Why, then, round *up* in favor of

⁸Brown seems to respond to this objection as the first objection he considers, but his response is unclear.

consciousness rather than rounding *down*?

Talk of parts and wholes also invites unwelcome counter-analogies. Part of the cosmos is malodorous. Is it then right to say that the cosmos itself is malodorous? Many of the same parts of the cosmos that are conscious are also ignorant, naïve, or selfish. Should we say the cosmos itself is ignorant, naïve, or selfish? (Notice this would conflict with the claim that the universe is providential.) And on and on. It's not clear how Cain can avoid these kinds of counter-arguments.⁹ Allowing ourselves to predicate of the entire cosmos any property that belongs to one part of it seems to be a mistake.

The lesson I take from this is the same that I take from the discussion of Brown's argument above: that if the cosmos is conscious, it is conscious in a very different way from you and I. We should appreciate this difference, and search for an account of consciousness that is plausible and accommodates both our intuitions about the nature of consciousness and our best scientific theories of the nature of the universe.

§3 Is the universe providential?

The Stoics held that the universe was providential, in the sense that it provides for our wellbeing. In a rationally-ordered cosmos, there are no random events or coincidences; but everything happens for the best possible reason. The Stoics believed as some Christians believe that god never apportions out for you more than you can handle (though they would give very different explanations for this).

This can be very hard to believe, especially for the philosophically-inclined who are already cooking up counterexamples: what about Ebola?, what about natural disasters?, what about bad luck?, and on and on.¹⁰ I am sensitive to those concerns, too—I find worries like these to be the greatest challenge to traditional theism. But there is a way of phrasing the Stoic view, and making it admittedly more modest, that makes it more plausible.

Epictetus would be helpful to consult here. He says that you must live with a sense of gratitude and the ability to appreciate the usefulness in everything that happens. He does not command us to appreciate the justice, the overall goodness, or the perfection in everything that happens, but the *usefulness*.

Everything that happens is an opportunity to develop virtue. Conjoin this with the Stoic doctrine that virtue is the only good. So, everything that happens is good in at least one respect, because it is always up to us to make use of a circumstance—even Ebola, even natural disasters, even bad luck—to develop virtue. After all, a metal is never purified until it is first put through a crucible of flame. Marcus echoes this view in the *Meditations* when he says, “Bad fortune borne well is good fortune” (4:49).

⁹A similar argument can be dispatched with by the same strategy. Some aspects of the cosmos are conscious—so it is appropriate to say that the cosmos has consciousness *as an aspect* or *attribute*. This is all well and good, but note that by the same token it has malodorousness, ignorance, naiveté, and selfishness as aspects or attributes. This should be unsatisfying. (This argument was suggested to me by Ken Brown in conversation.)

¹⁰Though, as we will see below, there is no such thing, to the Stoic, as bad luck.

Notice, however, that this is a significant modification of what we usually mean by providential. The cosmos cannot be providential in the way that a parent is, in that it actively chooses to protect or provide for a child, or cares for its young. (If the universe is not conscious in any meaningful way, then it cannot *choose* anything, or care for us.) Moreover, if this is all we mean by being providential, then even the most neglectful or abusive parents would be providential, since the way they treat their children is *also* an opportunity for the child to develop virtue. Therefore, what their children suffer at their hands is good in a respect. This may be difficult to swallow. If this is all that is meant by providential, then it may not be a species of providence that is worthy of admiration, worship, or gratitude.

Does the orthodoxy outlined above end up just being a commitment that we *have* to make, rather than a propositional view we can justify with logical argument and empirical evidence? If Stoicism is a theological system, what would a theological system be without asking its adherents to make the occasional leap of faith? Maybe they are being asked to make a leap of faith, in the form of committing to a view of consciousness and a view of providence that are both at odds with mainstream scientific understanding of the universe — which is to say, they are at odds with the ideas we seem to have most reason to believe for the moment.

NOTE

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