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The following essay is from Nigel Glassborow, a reader who disagreed with Ryan Jenkins article of the last eJournal issue #22, "Is the Cosmos Conscious and Providential?" In the spirit of philosophical inquiry, The Stoic Philosopher is always ready to offer counter-arguments to any point of view when appropriate. ed.

Is the Cosmos Conscious and Providential? Take 2

by Nigel Glassborow

In his essay on the same subject [Issue # 22, 'The Stoic Philosopher' eJournal], Ryan Jenkins PhD offers the key statement of belief for those who enter their names on the Registry of the Society of Epictetus, *"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."*

He ended his piece by saying, *"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."*

In his 'Conway Memorial Lecture' given at the South Place Institute on 16th March 1915, Professor Gilbert Murray stated that *"Stoicism may be called either a philosophy or a religion"* - a point that becomes obvious as one reads more about its history and if one looks to the original extant records we have – especially those quoting Epictetus.

About 80 years later A A Long stated that *"Stoic eudaimonism makes sense if and only if one adopts a Stoic view of the way things are. If as I have claimed, determinism and divine providence are crucial features of that view, any attempt to elucidate Stoic ethics which ignores these features will be broken backed."* ['Stoic Studies' page 201, Cambridge University Press 1996]

Contrary to these views, many look to Stoicism as being an academic philosophy that **must** bow to the 'logic' of science and the scientific method. Science is almost deified, with analytical philosophy being

seen as its priesthood. But look to what science and philosophy actually offers us and this stance is little more than an irrational belief.

The traditional Stoic, be they signed up to the Society of Epictetus or not, follows a system that is based on observation of the world about us and reasoned belief. It is not a system that requires that every one of its views, beliefs and principles be proved to the n^{th} degree. The starting point is ‘What it is reasonable to believe’, and this is followed by ensuring that any given aspect of the system fits harmoniously with the whole. Zeno offered a complete sphere of ideas that presents us with a practical and spiritual guide to life – a manual on ‘the craft of living life’.

And one of the prime beliefs to be found in classical Stoicism is that the Cosmos is a living conscious ‘creature’.

Now one can ask what is meant by this statement. Exactly what is the nature of ‘consciousness’ when applied to the whole Cosmos. One can come up with all manner of definitions of ‘consciousness’ and then show that it is not reasonable to believe that any of these can apply to the whole Cosmos. Jenkins to some extent follows this process.

But one needs to ask, is it necessary to exactly define ‘something’ that one is not able to fully describe in order to claim that there is a ‘something’ there to talk about. We often use words as saying ‘this something is not unlike this other something’ to give some impression of intent while not claiming that the ‘something’ is going to turn out to be exactly akin to that to which we are comparing it.

Science theorised about ‘black holes’ claiming in the early days that it would not be possible to see them, yet it is now known that ‘black holes’ can be seen in manners that were not originally envisaged even down to one ‘black hole’ having been described as ‘the brightest object in its location in the sky’. Scientists now talk of ‘dark energy’ and ‘dark matter’ even though they do not know **exactly** what they are referring to. It is probable that if they ever discover what the ‘influences’ they are observing are that it will be found that the words ‘dark’, ‘energy’ and ‘matter’ may not actually describe what they are looking at.

Likewise with ‘consciousness’. Even where the word relates to ‘sentient beings’ scientists are at odds over exactly what it is and how come it appears to exist as part of a physical universe. So when it comes to the idea that the whole Cosmos is ‘conscious’ in some form or other, like the rest of us, individual scientists tend to rely on their personal sense of what it is right to believe or not to believe – even when faced with subatomic and quantum science (and/or theoretical science).

Read any book on these subjects that also look to the experiments (observational science) that have led to the current scientific thinking and the book will be littered with expressions that relate to a state of ‘consciousness’.

Just look at Brian Cox and Jeff Forshaw in ‘The Quantum Universe: everything that can happen does happen’ [2011 Penguin Books]:

*Quantum Theory describes a world in which a particle really can be in several places at once and moves from one place to another by **exploring** the entire Universe simultaneously.*

*The ball flying through the air 'knows' which path to choose because it **actually, secretly, explores** every possible path.*

*Every electron in the Universe **knows** about the state of every other electron.*

To add to this issue of 'the consciousness' in science, the Physics Nobel Laureate Eugene Wigner said: 'When the province of physical theory was extended to encompass microscopic phenomena through the creation of quantum mechanics, the concept of consciousness came to the fore again. It was not possible to formulate the laws of quantum mechanics in a fully consistent way without reference to the consciousness.'

Some form of 'consciousness field' that permeates the whole Universe is well and truly part of the modern day scientific debate – so the Stoic's 'conscious Cosmos' is not "at odds with mainstream scientific understanding of the universe". All that is needed is a little consideration regards the culture and knowledge base within which the original Stoic theory was developed and expressed.

Looked at in modern terms, the 'passive principle' of the 'plastic fire' is seen to be akin to the sea of particles, forces and energy that science looks to. The Stoic take is that this 'sea' of ingredients would be inert without the 'active principle' that is 'the consciousness' that science is trying to incorporate into their understanding of how everything manifests as it does. And so the Stoic understanding that in some manner 'consciousness' permeates all 'matter' (be it particles, forces and/or energy etcetera) is still a reasonable stance to take.

The question for the Stoic following the Stoic line of reasoning today is as to if 'the consciousness' is active in influencing the process of change that moves the flow of existence forward. Is it akin to a master program that manifests the 'reality' of a computer game that allows the 'gamers' to follow their own choices and in the processes adjusts the flow of 'the game of life' to respond in accord with the fixed rules and limits of the game? Or is it 'the Logos' (the Stoic deity) that holds influence over how the Cosmos is manifested and how it progresses in the experiential moment through the flow of change that is existence?

The classic Stoic answer is that 'the consciousness' is '*the universal governor and organiser of all things*' – a description that can apply to a 'master program' or a deity. The 'physics' is the same. The only difference is as to the words that one uses.

On the deity side, Zeno followed the separate but linked view that throughout history and across cultures and faiths there exists a belief that some form of 'living' deity, force or state of being is seen to be 'involved' in existence being as it is. So we have the observational physics of Zeno's days, and of today, regards the nature of things. We also have the 'common perception of humankind' where the wise observed that there is a need for a deity of some form to explain why existence actually exists - not necessarily as a first cause, but as an immanent force manifesting the Cosmos moment by moment.

So it may be seen that the 'conscious Cosmos' in Stoicism is both a view based on physical observation - and - a statement of belief based on a reasoned assessment of a 'common belief' to be found in the wisdom teachings throughout the world.

When it comes to providence, as A A Long suggests, one needs to consider both the Stoic take on determinism and providence in that they are closely related to the Stoic understanding of the nature of the Logos as '*the universal governor and organiser of all things*'.

The Stoic rationale does not see the Logos as being tied to a never ending line of 'cause and effect'. What Stoicism offers is a constant flow of 'cause' where it is the Logos that is actively causing all that is at any given moment to be as it is. Despite some speculation by some of the Stoics of old, Stoicism tells us that every aspect of existence is not preordained because of some mechanical almost clock like process of inevitability. In Stoicism everything that exists and happens is rational in that all that happens is the result of some 'conscious drive' – that is, moment by moment, the 'active principle' rationally manifests 'what is' out of the 'passive principle'.

In classic Stoicism the flow of change is a conscious flow of change – the 'passive' nature of the Cosmos does not change anything on its own. The manifestation of the Cosmos is not to be seen as the effect of 'atoms' randomly knocking into each other as was promoted by the Epicureans. It is the result of the Logos (the 'active principle') rationally and systematically causing matters to be as they are.

As Sir James Jeans an English physicist, astronomer and mathematician stated of quantum mechanics, '*The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine.*'

With 'providence' we are into the Stoic idea that 'the consciousness' seen as the Logos can plan ahead in that we are talking of 'forethought'. In common with the many other faiths, the Stoics believe that there is purpose to existence. The Logos is not a helpless force that must follow a predetermined path. For instance, it actively coordinates matters in that it has to adjust to the input of us rational animals that are able to manipulate existence in our neck of the woods.

And if we are able to manipulate the flow of events, why not the Cosmos as a whole.

The Stoic rationale sees that any denial of a 'consciousness' that has a greater awareness and input than we have is into the realms of human-centric egoism. The Stoic position is that if we have a level of awareness and the ability to influence the flow of change that is existence, why should there not be something that has a greater level of awareness and influence than we do? We are back to '*the universal governor and organiser of all things*'.

It 'governs' according to the laws of nature, but it also 'organises'. And organising suggest forethought. This is why the Stoics claim that the whole of existence is rational – the Cosmos is a coordinated whole that acts in the moment as a rational flow of change. It acts with 'one mind' and that 'mind' is striving for what is best for the whole. That is, it is providential.

But does that mean that It is only serving our interests as a species? The Stoic answer is that it will where it can, but where other matters run counter to our interests then we might not fare so well. And the Stoic answer to this is 'acceptance'. Even where the Cosmos is unable to put our supposed best interests first, as 'sparks of the Divine Fire' we know that the interests of the whole must take precedence and so we will accept with equanimity whatever befalls us for we know that the Cosmos is being 'as providential as it can be'. The Stoic deity, the conscious Cosmos, is not all powerful. What it 'wills' is as much limited by its nature as our nature limits how much we can translate what we 'will' into action.

But as with the many circular reasonings that Stoicism offers, the question of providence is not a matter relevant to the conscious living Cosmos alone. We may look to the Logos for signs of providence, put as 'sparks of the Logos', in trying to 'live in accord with Nature', we are guided to be providential ourselves. This is why Stoicism guides the Stoic to live for their fellow creatures, society and the

‘Cosmos’ – we are guided to live selflessly and to try to ensure that our lives serve the whole in a providential manner.

What we look for in the Logos we must also look for in ourselves. This is our faith.

It is not for us to develop our ability as actors for our own self-aggrandisement. It is for us to develop our ability as actors in order that we may play our parts well and so contribute as best we can to the overall presentation of the play.

If some want to ignore the very core beliefs of Stoicism while borrowing some of what they find useful, that is fine. People have been doing that for millenia. But I wonder why do some who look to Stoicism for its therapeutic effect feel a need to belittle the beliefs which lead to the very practices that they claim to admire.

After all, as Professor Gilbert Murray also said in his lecture, *“Starting out, with every intention of facing the problem of the world by hard thought and observation, resolutely excluding all appeal to tradition and mere mythology, it ends by making this tremendous assumption, that there is a beneficent purpose in the world and that the force which moves nature is akin to ourselves. If we once grant that postulate, the details of the system fall easily into place.”*

So for the ‘unbeliever’ some Stoic ideas will appear difficult and counter-intuitive and need to be applied as a matter of faith. One is looking at faith through ignorance. In such circumstances the ideas if used in isolation from the rest of Stoicism may be misapplied. Just look to some of the disastrous outcomes caused by Victorian ideas about living stoically.

For the ‘believer’ matters ‘fall easily into place’ as a result of a reasoned assessment of the overall Stoic system. The traditional Stoic finds faith through knowledge. Within the context of the Stoic sphere of principles which comprises its physics, its rationale and its ethics, all of the practices are seen to be simple and rational - and the bonus is that the Stoic system, taken as a whole, works.

Nigel Glassborow is a retired upholsterer and currently a retirement home manager living in Nottinghamshire, England. He is a Stoic of some 30 years standing. He has been active in posting comments on the Stoicism Today blog and the International Stoic Forum. He also had his essay “Without the Divine, there is no Stoicism” published on the Stoicism Today site and in Stoicism Today: Selected Writings II Edited by Patrick Usher. While being on the Registry of the Society of Epictetus as one who believes in a conscious Cosmos he has not taken part in any of its training, so his views here are his personal views and not a response from the Society.

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