



THE STOIC PHILOSOPHER

PANTHEISM AND THEISM



SOME THOUGHTS ON THE STOIC GOD

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The idea of the Stoic God is, I think, one of the hardest Stoic concepts to grasp. It is something that I have been working on for a few years now, and there are still times when I am left perplexed. I can understand why some would choose to forgo understanding what the Stoics meant by “God,” but in my experience, the journey to understanding has been worthwhile, and I do not think I would have stuck with Stoicism otherwise.

In part, the difficulties arise from the difference between the nature of the Stoic God in comparison to our common notions of God, or gods, today. It isn’t comparable or similar to the monotheistic god of the Abrahamic religions, which we most likely think of when encountering the concept. But the difficulties in understanding the Stoic God likely extend beyond just our misguided modern assumptions and are in part due to the uniqueness of Stoic theology and physics. Chrysippus saved his teaching regarding the Stoic God until the very end of his Stoic curriculum:

The theories about the gods have to be the last thing to be taught, on top of everything else, when the soul is fortified

and strong and able to remain silent in front of the uninitiated. For it is quite a struggle to hear the right things about the gods and to get a hold of them.

-Chrysippus

The Stoic God is often referred to as pantheistic, but we need to keep in mind that the term “pantheism” is rather modern and that there are also elements of Stoic theology that could be considered theism and polytheism (1). The Stoic God is difficult to pin down because it is the divine intelligence immanent throughout all of Nature – essentially, nature is God to the Stoic. And nature for the Stoics is used in a broad sense, encompassing the whole of the universe. Nature for a Stoic is rationally ordered and benevolent; it is organized through intelligent, rational processes and is the sustainer and provider of all life. It is in this way that the Stoics view Nature as divine.

Pantheism

Stoics may be described as pantheists because God is the universe itself, the totality of everything. Stars, planets, organisms, mountains, you, and me are all parts of the whole which is God. The pantheistic aspect of the Stoic God is quite evident in the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius; many passages talk about the interconnectedness of everything and that God pervades all things.

“All things are interwoven, and the bond that unites them is sacred, and hardly anything is alien to any other thing, for they have been ranged together and are jointly ordered to form a common universe. For there is one universe made up of all that is, and one God who pervades all things, and one substance and one law, and one reason common to all intelligent creatures, and one truth, if indeed there is one perfection for all creatures who are of the same stock and partake of the same reason.”

-Marcus Aurelius, Meditations 7.9

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1. Algra, K. (2003). Stoic Theology. In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (pp. 153–178). Cambridge University Press.

It is also important to keep in mind that we are a part of Nature and are in no way separated from it. We do not stand outside Nature or build our societies to protect ourselves from Nature. Remember, Nature encompasses all of the universe. The goal of Stoicism, living in agreement with Nature, necessarily involves both universal nature and our own nature. Ultimately, we aim to bring our nature into agreement with that of universal Nature, to have all our choices and impulses in harmony with the will of God/Nature.

Always keep the following points in mind: what the nature of the whole is, and what my own nature is; and how my nature is related to that of the whole, and what kind of a part it is of what kind of a whole; and that no one can prevent you, in all that you do and say, from always being in accord with that nature of which you are a part.

-Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.9

Lines like *Meditations* 2.9 begin to show the important notion that we share reason with God; our rationality is a portion of the rationality inherent within Nature.

Theism

Some aspects of Stoic theology resemble or are getting near to theism due to our shared reason with God, our share of the divine. Our reason, for the Stoics, is the greatest gift given to us from Nature, and is one of the few things that are considered truly our own. There is also in some respects a differentiation between God and matter, creating a dualistic aspect of the cosmos. This dualism is not in any way transcendent or supernatural; there are no miracles or divine interventions. It is due to the unique metaphysics of the Stoics, where the substance of the universe is made up of two principles; one is the passive principle, which is inert matter, and the second is the active principle, logos or God, the intelligence that shapes and organizes matter.

This almost creates a type of dualism. But the Stoics remain monists because they say both principles are totally mixed with each other, like the ingredients that go into baking a cake.

This bit of dualism brings in some ideas that start to lean towards theism, giving importance to the divine aspect over inert matter. This is seen in Seneca with Letter 41, The God within Us:

When a soul rises superior to other souls, when it is under control, when it passes through every experience as if it were of small account, when it smiles at our fears and at our prayers, it is stirred by a force from heaven. A thing like this cannot stand upright unless it be propped by the divine. Therefore, a greater part of it abides in that place from whence it came down to earth. Just as the rays of the sun do indeed touch the earth, but still abide at the source from which they are sent; even so the great and hallowed soul, which has come down in order that we may have a nearer knowledge of divinity, does indeed associate with us, but still cleaves to its origin; on that source it depends, thither it turns its gaze and strives to go, and it concerns itself with our doings only as a being superior to ourselves.

-Seneca, Letter 41.5

Likewise, Epictetus speaks of our inner guardian spirit, or daimon, in *Discourses* 1.14. Essentially this is the divine aspect within each of us:

To what other guardian could he have entrusted to us that would have been better and more vigilant than this? And so, when you close your doors and create darkness within, remember never to say that you're on your own, for in fact, you're not alone, because God is within you, and your guardian spirit too. And what need do they have of light to see what you're doing?

-Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.14.13-14

And God is also seen as a benevolent provider and guide:

Bring on me now, Zeus, whatever trouble you may wish, since I have the equipment that you granted to me and such resources as will enable me to distinguish myself through whatever may happen.

-Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.6.37

To me, as someone who was an atheist and never a practicing Christian, these passages sound similar to theism. Not so much in the manner of a God watching over us, but more so in guiding or judging us. This gets complicated with Pantheism because God is not a being out there separate from the universe, but rather the universe itself, and everything contained within it, is God. But this does get to something that I have found very valuable – we humans are not the measure of all things. What is good is not whatever one deems best; what is good is determined by the cosmos or God. And, we have the gift of reason, divine reason, to help us navigate through the world and discover what that good is. That is, as long as we pay attention.

It is wise to hearken, not to me, but to my Word [Logos], and to confess that all things are one.

-Heraclitus

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