

The Early Stoics

Introduction Part 4 – The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism Stoic Natural Philosophy or Physics

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"No kind of philosophy is more profitable ... than the philosophy of the Stoics." —Thomas James

"Stoicism is the greatest system of organized thought which the mind of man had built up for itself in the Greco-Roman world. ... It represents a way of looking at the world and the practical problems of life which possesses still a permanent interest for humankind, and a permanent power of inspiration." —Gilbert Murray

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The Best of the Early Stoics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Early Stoics.

Introduction Part 4

The Big Themes & Ideas of the Early Stoics & Stoicism Stoic Natural Philosophy or Physics

N^{ATURAL PHILOSOPHY OR *physics*}.¹ Natural philosophy or physics (the word comes from the Greek word for nature, *physis*) is the study of *what is*, of everything that is. For the Stoics, this includes everything within the ordered reality of the cosmos² and everything without—things such as the basic principles, elements, and (the) void on the one hand, to the stars, sun, moon, and earth on the other. On earth it includes rocks, plants, animals, and humans, and relative to humans, the body and soul. In the heavens it includes the study of the one God, as well as the many gods.

Natural philosophy seeks to understand the nature of things in terms of substance, causes, genus and species, parts and wholes, qualities and characteristics. There are math- and nature-based questions. The former involve investigations into the revolution of the stars or the size of the sun—to give a few examples. The latter look at things such as matter and the various kinds of mixture, and whether the cosmos is living or not. Then there are investigations inspired by medical inquiry. These research the leading part of the soul (the *hēgemonikon*), as well as the originating seeds and like things. Otherwise, as do natural philosophers of other

schools, the Stoics study various earth and sky phenomena such as comets, meteors, winds, hail, rain, snow, lighting and thunder, the rainbow, the seasons, and earthquakes.

The Stoics count natural philosophy as a virtue. According to Cicero, they do so “with good reason since he who is to live in accord with nature must base himself on the management and order of the entire cosmos.” Such a man must not only understand the structure and organization of the whole cosmos but also how it is managed—by whom or by what means. “No man,” Cicero continues, “can truly make judgments regarding good and bad things unless he knows about the whole plan of nature, and also about the life of the gods, and the answer to the question whether human nature is or is not in harmony with the whole—that is, with the cosmos.”

Our ethical life, based as it is on judgment, as we will see, hinges on our understanding of natural philosophy. We see this, for instance, relative to ancient ethical maxims such as “nothing in excess.” Excess relative to what, precisely? Natural philosophy answers the question. “Without natural philosophy, no one can consider the meaning of the ancient maxims of the wise—a meaning that is quite significant—that command us to ‘submit to the right moment’ and ‘follow god’ and ‘know yourself’ and ‘nothing in excess.’” Finally: “this knowledge [natural philosophy] alone is able to convey the power of nature to cultivate justice and maintain friendship and the other kinds of love. Nor can we truly understand piety toward the gods nor the amount of gratitude we owe them without an explanation of nature.”

*Nature.*³ The Greek word for nature (again, *physis* or *phusis*) is related to the verb *phuō*, which means, among other things, “to produce” or “to generate.” We see this meaning in the Stoic use of “nature” when they employ it to signify “that which causes terrestrial things to spring up.” Nature, however, is more than that which produces things—though it is also that.

Diogenes Laertius provides the following definition of nature, which gives us a fuller idea of what the Stoics meant:

Nature is a permanent state or condition moving from itself, producing and holding together all things that arise out of it at determined times and in accord with the generative principles, and effecting results homogenous with their sources.

There are three points to keep in mind in this definition. First, there is nature itself, something permanent or lasting (the Greek is *hexis*, a permanent state or condition) that is in motion in that it produces things, holds them together, and causes further things (results) to occur. The motion itself is self or nature generated.⁴ Second, there are various things (“all things”) that arise from nature, which is to say they originate in and are caused by nature, or, more specifically, by means of “generative principles.” Third, there is a regularity in terms of “determined times.” With these points, we note aspects of nature that the Stoics emphasized: permanency, motion, regularity.

According to Cicero, Zeno defined nature as “a craftsmanlike or skillful fire that proceeds methodically to the work of production or generation.” Expanding on this definition, Cicero states that the “whole of nature . . . follows a specific way and adheres to a definite method.” Nature is not merely *like* a craftsman, but it *is* “a craftsman,” one that “cares and looks out for the benefit and timeliness of everything.”⁵ Cicero reports that “all things are subject to and dependent upon nature, by which they are produced and sustained in the most excellent manner.”

Finally, nature supports all. We observe this not only in the whole of the cosmos but in its parts as well, such as the earth and things upon the earth.⁶

If nature supports the earth and causes her to thrive, then the same conclusion applies to the rest of the cosmos. For a plant’s roots cling to the earth. By contrast, animals are sustained by breathing air. And air itself sees with us and hears with us and speaks with us—for none of these functions can be performed without air.

The all and the whole. The Stoics distinguish between what they term “the all” (*to pan*) and “the whole” (*to*

holon). The all or the totality of things is comprised of both the cosmos and the external void, whereas the whole or the entirety consists of the cosmos alone without the void.⁷

We will get to the cosmos and its nature in a moment. As for the external void, it is incorporeal and infinite or unlimited, the emptiness that is “spread around the outside of the cosmos.” Significantly, the void is external to the cosmos, which is to say that “there is no emptiness or void within the cosmos.”⁸ We’ll see what this means for the cosmos momentarily. For now, one final point. Though the void *can be* occupied with bodies, with corporeal things, in point of fact it is not.

*The nature of the cosmos.*⁹ If the void is infinite or unlimited, incorporeal, and empty of things, the cosmos is, by contrast, finite or limited, corporeal, and full of things. Since there is no emptiness or void within the cosmos, it is fully united. Diogenes Laertius explains that this unity “necessarily follows from the sympathy and agreement or joined tension of heavenly things in relation to earthly things.” In this way, the cosmos is a kind of continuum, one thing in contact with another, and that with another and another, from top to bottom, side to side, and all around.

Round and rotating, the cosmos takes on the form of a globe or sphere, a circle in three dimensions. The circle and sphere, we are told, are the most beautiful shapes or forms, excelling all others in terms of uniformity and compactness.¹⁰ Not only that, but the sphere is the form that is “the most suitable for motion.”

That the cosmos is in motion is significant. Motion points to the fact that it is not some static thing that has forever been as it is and forever will be. Rather, the cosmos was generated, is in a state of change or transformation, and will eventually perish in a massive act of self-destruction the Stoics call the great conflagration.¹¹

Not only is the cosmos in motion but, more specifically, it is a living, rational animal—that is, a living being or thing (*zōon*). “It is an animal,” we read, “in the sense that it is a substance that is alive and endowed with sensation.” It is rational since it is pervaded by

reason (*logos*) and managed by mind (*nous*). “The cosmos is managed by mind and providence inasmuch as mind pervades every part of it just as the soul pervades every part of us.” But “there is a difference of degree” in terms of how mind extends through the cosmos. “Mind spreads through some parts as a permanent state or condition, as is the case with bones and sinews. But it spreads through other parts as mind itself, as is the case with the leading part of the soul.”

Pervaded with mind, the cosmos is divine, which is to say it is God. The cosmos is “entirely perfect.” This is so because it “includes everything.” The cosmos lacks nothing—an attribute (“lacking nothing”) that is commonly applied to God in the ancient Greek world.¹² “The cosmos is equipped in every way, perfect and full in terms of its measure and parts.” This, the Stoics contend, is particularly true relative to virtue or excellence (*aretē*). “There is nothing in the cosmos better than excellence or virtue. Virtue, therefore, is an essential attribute of the cosmos since nothing is more complete than the cosmos.”¹³

We may finish with the summation of the Stoic view of the cosmos given by the Christian historian Eusebius of Caesarea.¹⁴ “The Stoics call the whole cosmos with all its parts God. They furthermore say that God alone is one, finite, living, eternal, and divine. All bodies are contained in God, and in him there is no void.”

The two principles (s. archē)—a first look. “The Stoics hold that there are two principles of the whole cosmos.”¹⁵ There is one active and one passive principle, about which we will learn more shortly. For now, we need merely note and keep in mind the four chief characteristics of the two. Both are without beginning in time, indestructible, corporeal, and without form.¹⁶ One last point: the two principles are different from the basic elements found in the cosmos.

*The elements (s. stoicheion).*¹⁷ Like the two cosmic principles, the elements are corporeal. In contrast with the principles, however, they have a beginning, meaning they are generated. They are destructible or perishable, as well, since they are eventually destroyed in the great conflagration. Finally, if the principles are formless, the elements have form.

There are four elements. They are fire, air, water, and earth. In terms of their basic qualities, we read that “fire is the hot element, and water is the moist; air is the cold, earth the dry—though this last quality is also found in the air.” We will return to these four again when we look at the generation and destruction of things within the cosmos.

For now it is important to understand that the elements are the things from which all other things within the cosmos arise and to which they return. “An element is that from which particular things first come to be at their birth and into which they are finally resolved.”¹⁸ The elements are like the letters of the alphabet, which are “the elements of speech.” Marshalled together and spoken, the letters or alphabetic elements become speech. “C” and “A” and “T,” each one an individual letter, form “CAT.” Hence, “CAT” originates with or arises from C, A, and T, just as a cat within the cosmos arises from the four elements.

Though things arise from and return to the elements, we should keep in mind that, absolutely speaking, it is from and into the two principles (the passive and the active) that the cosmos is generated and perishes. Let’s take a closer look at these principles.

*The passive principle—substance (ousia) or matter (hylē).*¹⁹ Of the two principles of the cosmos, matter—identified as first or “primary matter”—is the passive principle. As such, matter is that in the cosmos which is acted upon by the active principle. Accordingly, it can be changed. It may be useful to think of a big lump of clay in terms of matter’s passive capacity or potential for modification.

What is matter? It is “the substance of all existing things,” we read, where substance itself is defined as “a body (*sōma*) that is finite.”²⁰ To state it another way, substance is a limited corporeal thing. (Recall, both principles are corporeal.) In itself, matter has no form and no specified nature. It is “substance without quality.” Finally, matter is both without beginning in time and indestructible.

What changes does matter undergo because of the activity of the active principle? The short answer is *every* change. Diogenes Laertius explains that “matter

is that out of which or from which anything whatever is produced.” As such, matter is the “from which” of all things. In other words, matter changes into all things, which is to say it undergoes every change that occurs in the cosmos.²¹

First and foremost matter is the “from which” of the four elements, which first emerge from matter when the things of the cosmos are produced. These elements are, in some sense, matter itself. We know this because we are told that the “four elements together constitute substance without quality, that is, matter.” Yet, as we will see, in another sense they are not matter. “There is a difference between principles [including matter] and elements.”

Relative to the whole cosmos, matter “neither increases nor diminishes.” Relative to the various parts, however, it “both increases and diminishes.” This simply means that as a whole, the finite quantity of matter is constant, but as a certain part—say a stone or a tree or a giraffe or a woman—it varies.

Most importantly, since matter is unable to be and do anything on its own, it must necessarily have the active principle within it in order to be or do anything—a point that brings us to the active principle itself.

*The active principle—God, reason, mind.*²² “The active principle,” Diogenes Laertius explains, “is the reason within the passive principle, which is to say, it is God.” Further, he states that “God and mind and fate and Zeus are one thing.” With these two remarks, we see that the active principle may be discussed under different labels—reason, God, Zeus, or fate. For the Stoics, these identifications allow them to relate Stoicism both to traditional Greek religion, albeit in a unique manner, and to the long tradition of Greek philosophy. As for us, they offer some basic starting points to understand the nature of the active principle.

First, the term “active.” Hailing from the Greek verb *poieō* or *poiein*, it has a range of meanings. The “active” notion itself comes from the verb’s meaning relative to *doing*. The active principle is that which does things. What does it do? It *makes* or *produces* things, as a poet uses the alphabet to make poems or a bronzesmith works with fire to produce things out

of copper and tin. As maker or producer, it is *cause*—the cause of things. Finally, all these—doing, making, producing, causing—involve *motion*. Hence, the active principle is always in motion, doing things, producing things.

The active principle, we learn, is God. In a sense, God is the cosmos itself. “The Stoics call the whole cosmos with all its parts God.”²³ This is true for the Stoics in the way that we might identify ourselves with certain aspects of ourselves, say the aware, active, or living aspects versus those that are more unaware and passive, or not exactly alive. When someone is living, we say, “There’s Joe.” When someone has died, we say, “Joe has passed,” or, “Joes is gone”—that, even though the body remains. Before we cut our fingernails, we may call them “mine” as we care for them. And so we may consider them as ourselves. But when clipped and discarded in the trash, we don’t exactly think of them as *ourselves*. This is what the Stoics are getting at when they identify God with the cosmos. It is not that God or the active part is matter or the passive part, but that when God is acting within the passive part, *that* is God.

What more can we say about the God of the Stoics? First, we may repeat what we’ve already stated regarding the two principles—that God is without beginning, indestructible, corporeal, and without form. Corresponding to the first two attributes, we may add that God is eternal and immortal. Finally, along with matter, God is the fundamental “from which” that everything comes and the final “to which” that everything will return—the origin and the end of things.

As for God’s corporeality, the Stoics believe it follows from God’s activity. Because God is active, God must be corporeal. This must be true, reasons Zeno, since “anything capable of acting on anything or being acted on by anything in any manner could not be incorporeal.” God is the active, corporeal agent within the cosmos that acts upon matter, the passive substrate. Even so, we must recognize that God is not the same kind of body or corporeal nature as matter. Rather, Hippolytus tells us that the Stoic God is “a body of the utmost refinement.”

Though corporeal, God is nevertheless without form. More specifically, “God’s form is not human.” That said, God is “called by many names” and identified with the various gods that do take on human form—Zeus, Athena, Hera, Hephaestus, Poseidon, and Demeter. Rather than pointing to the form of God, however, these names simply indicate how God pervades all things. God “is the maker of the whole cosmos, and he is, as it were, the father of all things, both in general and in that part of him that pervades everything, that which is called many names according to its various powers.” For instance, “the name Athena is given since the leading part of God extends to the aether” or “Hephaestus since he spreads to the skillful fire.”

In this way, in the way that God “pervades everything,” the Stoics hold that the substance of God takes on the forms of everything God produces. “The Stoics define the substance of God this way,” Aetius makes clear, “it is an intelligent and fiery breath [or spirit] that has no shape [or form] but changes into whatever it wishes, becoming like all things.”²⁴ (That this breath is *fiery* is a point we will return to.) This transformation of God into all things is true not only of beautiful things but of ugly things as well. “The Stoics say that God is a pervading breath that pervades even ugly or putrid things.”

The order of the cosmos comes about through God’s activity. “The active principle is the reason (*logos*) within the passive principle, which is to say, God.” Acting, God makes. God is “the maker of the cosmos” — “of the orderly arrangement of the cosmos”; he is “the maker of each thing throughout the whole.” As we’ve already observed, God is “the father of all things.” He is, as the *Hymn to Zeus* states, “the origin and leader of nature, guiding all things with law.”

Along these lines, we know that God manages the cosmos. God takes “providential care of the cosmos and of the things in the cosmos.” We read that “the cosmos is managed by mind and providence inasmuch as mind pervades every part of it, just as the soul pervades every part of us.” God is “the one everlasting rational principle in all things.” This reason or *logos* is the “law of nature.”

Given God's *logos* nature, God is that which is the order or structure of the cosmos. Where there is law or measure or proportional relations, there is God. As such, God is the meaning of all, the most profound account or explanation that one can give of things. God is both the ground and limit of things, the ultimate definition of the cosmos as that which is most distinct (as the Stoics might put it given Chrysippus' understanding of definition—see above).

The preceding points bring us to the production or generation of the cosmos. Before we move on, though, let's log a few more points about God.

First, the Stoics hold that God is a living being (*zōon*). Consequently, when we consider the Stoic view of reality, we cannot exactly compare it to the kind of materialism in which living things emerge from non-living things or bits of matter (to put it simply). Rather, life (or Life)—a living principle, a living being—is the beginning point or the foundation of all reality. And recall: nature is a living thing. Therefore, where there is reality (nature, the cosmos), there is life. So it is that scholars avoid calling the Stoic view “materialist,” but rather say it is “physicalist” or “corporealism” or, given the underlying life aspect of things, it is “vitalist” (from *vita*, the Latin for life).

Second, there is no evil or bad within God. “God ... accept[s] nothing evil into himself.” Stated positively, this means that there is only good within God. What God is and what God does is good—surely something having to do with the fact that God is *logos*, reason itself, not to mention God's many other attributes.²⁵

It follows from the good within or the good that is God that God is perfectly or completely happy. Diogenes Laertius explains that because God accepts nothing evil into himself, he is “perfect in happiness.”²⁶ The same is potentially true for human beings—since to be good is to be happy. But more on that in “Stoic Ethics.”

For now, knowing that God without beginning and without end is the living, immortal, indestructible, rational, good, happy, and active principle that pervades matter, the passive principle, let's move on

to the production or generation of the cosmos and all the things therein.

*The production or generation of the cosmos.*²⁷ The first point to gather about the generation of the cosmos is that it is part of a cycle—a vast cycle of rising and falling, generation and destruction. We learn that “at certain periods of time, God absorbs into himself the whole of substance and once again produces it from himself.”

Of course this is somewhat paradoxical in that God *is* in some sense the cosmos and this substance (*ousia*).²⁸ One (imperfect) way to look at it might be a man who yo-yos in his personal fitness. There are times when he lets his body slide into a formless mass of fat and ill-formed muscle. There are other times, however, when he sets his mind to it—his mind that pervades his whole body—that he intentionally and mindfully exercises his body, skillfully shaping it relative to its quads, biceps, pectorals, and that six pack that was there all along. Then again there are other times when things reverse. And so on, repeatedly. Fitness enthusiast, couch potato; fitness enthusiast, couch potato—cycling again and again.

Whatever you make of the analogy, here's the description of the production or generation of the cosmos we have from the Stoics. First, the beginning. “In the beginning,” we are told, “God was by himself.”²⁹ This “God” is the active principle we have already encountered, and so he is everything we have already learned about God. One point we need to emphasize, though, is the fact that God at this moment (and always) is fire. This is not to say that he is fire in the sense that we know fire, as in a campfire or a candle flame. God is not the “fire” that is one of the four generated elements. Rather, God (in the beginning) is the primordial fire, God-as-fire, the “fiery breath” we've already encountered that becomes all things. This God-as-fire is “nature,” as Zeno puts it, “a craftsman-like or skillful fire that proceeds methodically to the work of production or generation.” Along with fire, God is breath or spirit (*pneuma*), as in “fiery breath”—something remarkably similar to air, in that breath, our warm breath, is simply the air we inhale and exhale.

In the beginning, then, God-as-fire, the fiery breath, is by himself. Then God—or the substance of the cosmos, or matter (given our sources, it's hard to know with precision)—is “changed,” we are told, “from fire into moisture.” How does God do this? God “turn[s] all substance into water by means of air.” So it is, therefore, that “the cosmos comes into being when its substance is changed from fire into moisture by means of air.”

We may conclude from these few points that God—God-as-fire and God-as-air (breath)—becomes water (moisture). It is at this point that the Stoics compare cosmic generation to the generation or begetting of any animal:

Just as in animal generation the seed (*sperma*) is surrounded by fluid, so in cosmic generation the generative principle (*spermatikos logos*) of the cosmos remains in the fluid [think of the water or moisture that has been produced by means of air] and makes the matter of the cosmos serviceable to God for the next stage of generation.

In animal generation it is the seed, the sperm (*sperma*), that actively carries the design and growth plan, as it were, of the generated animal. The female is the passive material—or so the ancients believed. Likewise, it is the active and rational generative principle (*spermatikos logos*, the rational seed or the seminal reason) that makes matter serviceable or good to work with.

Now that the rational, generative principle has been added to matter, we get the basic elements of the cosmos. “And so,” we read, this principle “produce[s] the four elements, fire, water, air, and earth.” These are the four elements we have already discussed above, the ones that are generated and will eventually perish. Recall, “fire is the hot element, and water is the moist; air is the cold, earth the dry.” How does this production of the four elements occur? According to the Stoics, “the denser part of the moisture”—the initial fluid or water that is produced from fire by means of air—“condenses into earth, and the finer part is turned into air. And this process of rarefaction goes on more and more until it generates fire.”

We must stop here and note that our sources seem to indicate two sets of elements. One set of three elements seems always to be present in or with or *as* God. God is fire; God is breath (air). Prior to or at the very beginning of the production of the cosmos, God transforms himself as fire into water or fluid by means of air (breath). Then comes the other set of four elements, the ones we are more or less familiar with in our daily lives—fire, air, water, and earth. The only element that seems to be lacking in or with or as God, therefore, is earth. Regardless, in order to grasp what the Stoics think about the production of the cosmos, we have to keep this distinction between the two sets of elements in mind—however unclear it is given our sources.³⁰

So we have the four elements, the very things from which all other things within the cosmos arise and to which they return. To repeat: “An element is that from which particular things first come to be at their birth and into which they are finally resolved.”

Next comes everything else, as the elements are the building blocks of all things. It is “from the mixture of these elements” that “plants and animals and the other general kinds of things” come.

That, in a few paragraphs, is the Stoic teaching regarding the genesis of the cosmos. In short, the cosmos’ production is a transformation or change of God or matter or substance (or God-matter-substance) into the four elements, and from the mixture of these everything else comes, including human beings.³¹

One last but significant point. Cicero explains that “it is by means of our hands”—that is, our human hands—“that we strive to produce another nature, as it were, out of things found in nature” (nature, here, signifying the cosmos). We see, therefore, that there are two natures or cosmoses. There is the cosmos (the natural) produced by God, by divine reason, and there is within the cosmos the human world (the artificial) produced by human beings, by human reason and art, which participates in divine reason.

What more can we say?

*The arrangement of the cosmos and the things therein.*³² As we have already seen, there is a certain orderly process in the production of the cosmos. One

thing leads to another in a step-by-step way. The significance of this for the whole cosmos is that it is ordered, which is the literal meaning of the Greek word *kosmos* (order).

God, we learn, “is the maker of the orderly arrangement of the cosmos.” Not only does the cosmos have the most suitable form for motion, the spherical form, but everything within it is arranged in the best possible manner. “The parts of the cosmos are arranged so that they could neither be more useful nor more beautiful in appearance”—a point we will return to in a moment.

What is this arrangement or structure? The answer comes in a few passages that address not only the elements themselves but where they are stationed in the cosmos:

[The Stoics] believe that the parts of the cosmos are arranged in the following manner. The earth is in the middle, located in the center. Next comes water, which is shaped like a sphere all around, concentric with the earth, so that the earth is within the water. After the water comes a spherical layer of air. There are five celestial circles.³³

The stars are located in these five circles—all the stars, including the so-called wandering stars or planets.

But where is fire in this view of the cosmos? We discover the answer in another passage. It is right there with the stars. “Fire is the highest element. It is also called aether and is first generated in the sphere of the fixed stars.” Then, as if going down the ladder of the Stoic cosmos, we read, “Next comes the sphere of the planets. Next to that is the air. Next is the water. And the lowest of all is the earth, which is at the center of all things.”

So we have the ordered cosmos. At the center of the cosmic sphere are earth-based things—rocks, fields, hills, and mountains. Then there is water. Think of all the bodies of water upon the earth’s surface—rivers, lakes, seas, and oceans—and all the water in the form of clouds just above the earth’s surface. Next there is air, something that would have

been known to the Stoics by the common experience of air at lower elevations or at the top of a mountain—air down here, air up there, air all the way up to the celestial sphere. Finally, the Stoics believe that the stars, including the sun, are fire.

A few more points about the stars while we are on them. One, they are living beings or animals. Two, they are divine, that is, gods. This includes not only stars as we conceive of them (fixed stars) but also planets (wandering stars). Two, as living beings and gods, the stars possess “sensation and intelligence.” We know this, three, thanks to the “order and regularity” of the stars, their “rational and measured motion” through the heavens that indicates design rather than happenstance. As such, the “eternal regularity of the stars” reveal a “completely rational” order, pointing to the fact that “the stars move by their own free will and their own understanding and divinity.”

The cosmos or world-structure is itself a continuum of the four elements or bodies marked by transformation or emergence. “Water rises up from earth,” we gather, and “air from water, and aether [or fire] from air.” And then the process is “reversed as air comes from aether, water comes from air, and earth, the lowest natural element, comes from water.” Significantly, it is the motion of this transformation or emergence that keeps the various portions of the world or cosmos together. “The parts of the cosmos are held together by the ongoing passage up and down, and side to side, of these four bodies by which all things are composed.”

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, “the parts of the cosmos are arranged so that they could neither be more useful nor more beautiful in appearance.” This is not meant by the Stoics to be a kind of Panglossian declaration that this world is *actually* “the best of all possible worlds.” Rather, it is merely intended to convey a simple point, that given the initial four existing elements and the conditions of the production of the cosmos, nothing better could actually be produced. As the Stoics put it, “Given the natural elements, the best that could be produced from them has been produced.” The four words “that could be produced” are key. “Anyone who wishes to improve

some part of the cosmos will either make it worse or”—in a violation of the conditions of production—“will be asking for something impossible given the nature of things.”

Now that we’ve explored the Stoic belief in an excellently ordered cosmos, let’s turn our attention to the hierarchy of nature, following it from the most rudimentary productions at bottom to the highest grade of being at top. We begin with plants, to which nature gives the powers of nourishment and growth. Next up are animals, upon whom nature bestows “sensation and motion, together with a kind of appetite or desire that draws them toward health-giving things and withdraws them from destructive things.” Humans are like other animals in that we share in sensation, motion, and appetency or impulse. But to impulse, nature adds the gift of reason so that humans are higher up than other animals such as horses, dogs, or frogs. As for human nature, generally speaking, it consists of body and soul, which are both corporeal, though differing in degree of fineness. The soul, as we have seen, is a “warm breath”; it is a “nature capable of sensation.” It has eight parts, the most important being the leading part of the soul (the *hēgemonikon*). The human mind is part of the cosmic mind. (For more on human nature, see “*The human parts or powers of knowing—the soul and its parts*” in “Stoic Logic or Knowing.”) Finally, the gods are at the top of the hierarchy of nature. They are living, rational beings. They are “beings that are naturally good and wise. From the very beginning, these beings are born with right and consistent reason, which is superior to human reason.”

How do we know that the gods exist? In short, we do, the Stoics argue, thanks to, one, our observation of the heavens that suggests intelligent design; two, the consensus of humankind in that all humans believe in the gods (or God) and always have; three, the recorded epiphanies of the gods, that they have appeared in bodily form to humans; four, the existence and utility of things such as divination, prophecy, divine signs, and the like; and, five, the absurd consequences that would follow from denying the existence of the divine—things such as piety, holiness,

wisdom, and justice would vanish along with the gods (or God).³⁴

Returning to humans: just as the gods are “joined together as citizens . . . in a community of friendship,” so humans also join together in various forms of partnership. Cicero explains that “nature creates in parents a love and affection for their children. This love and affection is the source to which we trace the origin of the association of humankind in communities.” Men and women unite together to form families. Families in turn join together to form communities, from villages to cities to city-states or nations. Not only do humans naturally relate to one another in community, but they are also joined with the gods. “There is a community that exists between the gods and men since they participate in reason, which is the law of nature.”³⁵ By contrast, humans are not united in society with the other animals. There is “no justice . . . between human beings and animals.” Consequently, “men can make use of animals for their own purposes without injustice.”

*The management of the cosmos and the things therein (the divine mind and providence).*³⁶ We have seen that the Stoics identify the active principle as God, Zeus, reason, mind, and fate, all significant identifiers relative to the generation, arrangement, and management of the cosmos. The most important identification, though, is mind, because, on analogy with human beings, mind or intellect is the chief location of reason, that which (theoretically, anyway) directs humans to the good, both in terms of survival and flourishing. With its rational capabilities, the mind manages human life, foreseeing what will come and successfully meeting it with various provisions. In the Stoic view, the same is true for the cosmos as a whole. “The cosmos is managed by mind and providence inasmuch as mind pervades every part of it just as the soul pervades every part of us.”³⁷ The divine mind, with its reason (*logos*) that knows and sees ahead and prepares the way for what will come, supplying whatever is necessary, extends through the whole of the cosmos, caring for each thing, large and small, by means of providence. That said, we learn that “there is a difference of degree” in terms of how far mind is

present. “In some parts there is more of mind, in others less.” Still, as a whole, “the cosmos and every part of the cosmos was formed from the beginning by the gods and is managed by the providence of the gods through all time.”

Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* is a celebration of God’s management of the cosmos. Therein, we learn that the whole cosmos obeys Zeus, who rules everything. Zeus is the “leader of nature, guiding all things with law.” He sets up natural limitations for things, determining what is suitable, and ordering the disordered. Nothing at all happens apart from God. By his thunderbolt—an element of the hymn that ties Stoicism to the traditional Greek myths and hymns—Zeus directs “the universal rational principle that moves through all things.” In this way, the noble is joined with the ignoble “so that there is one everlasting rational principle in all things.”

The management of the cosmos is performed not only by the one active principle, God or mind, but also by the many gods. “The cosmos is managed by the providence of the gods.” But recall, the gods are the manifestation of God; they *are* God going by other names. As the maker and manager of the cosmos, God “is, as it were, the father of all things, both in general and in that part of him that pervades everything, that which is called many names according to its various powers”—Zeus, Athena, Hera, Hephaestus, Poseidon, and Demeter. “In addition to the sidereal divinities,” we discover that “the natures of many other gods have been identified and named . . . from the great benefits they offer. . . . For [the Stoics] judged that whatever confers great utility on human beings must arise from divine goodness.”

*Against Epicureanism.*³⁸ The idea—that the gods actively oversee the management of the cosmos—stands in direct opposition to Epicureanism, a philosophy that was elaborated by Epicurus about the same time that Zeno of Citium was developing Stoicism. For Epicurus, the “blessed and indestructible” gods are not concerned with the “troublesome business” of managing the cosmos. Rather, the management of things, if we may call it such, is left to chance collisions of atoms in the void. As for the gods, he

declares that “the divine nature must be kept free from the task” of operating things and kept “in perfect bliss.” The Stoics disagree. In contrast to Epicurus’ invented “shadowy, do-nothing gods,” the Stoics affirm “there is a multitude of gods,” whose managerial work is easy. Still, “even though they are active, they do not have to pursue their endeavors by means of difficult and troublesome toil.” The bottom line:

Is it possible for any sensible person to observe all the stars, arranged as they are, and the vast sky, so splendidly ornate, and yet to regard them as being produced from bodies [atoms] randomly falling here and there and quickly moving back and forth? Or could have any other nature devoid of mind and reason produced these effects, which not only demand reason to bring them into existence, but it is impossible to understand what kind of things they are without the most advanced reasonings and calculations.³⁹

The point—that intelligence of a high order produces and orders all things—brings us to Stoic arguments for the divine management of the cosmos.

*Arguments for divine providence and intelligent design.*⁴⁰ For the Stoics, all things demonstrate the “rational design or purpose of an intelligent nature.” We may observe this, they claim, in the magnificent arrangement of things—in the order and beauty of the stars progressing through the heavens, as well as in much smaller phenomena, such as the way cranes fly in triangular formation or the partnership of a certain muscle and shrimp in procuring food. “The parts of the cosmos are arranged so that they could neither be more useful nor more beautiful in appearance. . . . [They] could not possibly have been as they are if they were not ruled by an intelligent and divine providence.” The conclusion? The arrangement of things is the result of “reason” and “deliberation” and “art” and, therefore, an “intelligent nature”; it is not “a matter of chance.”

How, after all, the Stoics query, can anyone possibly believe that this clearly ordered cosmos is a product of chance? Think of it this way, they challenge:

When you look at a statue or a painting, you see at once the presence of art. Likewise, when you see a ship sailing along some course, you do not doubt that it is moved along by reason and art. Or when you observe a sundial or a water clock, you grasp that it declares the hour of the day by means of an art and not by means of chance. How, then, does it make sense to suppose that the cosmos, which includes these very works of art and the craftsmen who made them and everything else, has no share in deliberation or reason?

They further use the following analogy to argue for the deliberate and intelligent production of the cosmos versus any chance production (as Epicurus and his adherents believe):

Must I not, at this point, express amazement that there are any men who persuade themselves that certain solid bodies they call atoms, which are carried along by the force of their own weight, produce, by the chance encounter of these bodies, this very well furnished and most beautiful cosmos? It seems that anyone who thinks that such a chance production is possible will also believe that, if we shake up and toss onto the ground a vast number of the letters of the alphabet . . . , it would be possible to produce the continuous text of the *Annals* of Ennius, all ready for us to read. As for me, I doubt whether chance would be able to produce even a single verse! How, then, can our Epicurean friends or anyone else assert that the cosmos is brought about by means of the random and chance collisions of tiny bodies? . . . If collisions of atoms are able to produce the cosmos, why can they not produce a colonnade or a temple or a house or a city? Relative to the cosmos, these are simple works and far easier to produce.⁴¹

*The purpose of divine providence.*⁴² What is the point of all this cosmic order or the goal of all this divine, rational activity? In general terms, it is about excellence of construction toward the end of the long-term survival and fullness of the cosmos. “Providence,” we are told, “is chiefly directed toward and occupied with, first, making sure the cosmos is the best constructed so that it will last, and, after that, making

sure it lacks nothing—most importantly that it contains uncommon beauty and every adornment.”

More specifically, however, the excellence of the cosmos “was made for those living beings that employ reason—that is, for the gods and for humans, who surpass all things in excellence since reason is the best thing of all.” “So it makes sense to believe,” the argument goes, “that the cosmos and everything within the cosmos was fashioned for the gods and human beings.”

Relative to the hierarchy of nature, we see that everything is ultimately ordered to the benefit and activity of human beings. “The grain and fruits produced by the earth were created for the sake of animals, and animals for the sake of human beings. . . . Man himself, however, is born to contemplate and imitate the cosmos.” As Eusebius of Caesarea puts the Stoic position, “We must suppose that the God who manages the whole takes into consideration humankind.”

Fate. Recall that the Stoics not only call God mind and reason but “fate” as well. For them, God *is* fate. Consequently, in some manner, God’s management of and providential care for the cosmos and everything therein occurs by means of fate, which is to say, by means of God himself. In short, then, the Stoics believe that everything is fated. As Chrysippus and others declare, “All things happen by fate.” It is up to humans to respond well to this fate. For more, read the following lengthy endnote.⁴³

*The destruction of the cosmos in the great conflagration.*⁴⁴ We have already encountered the Stoic conclusion that “the cosmos is destructible or perishable, inasmuch as it is generated.” From this we know that at some point in its long duration the cosmos will begin to decline and return to its formless origin. The Stoics term this eventual return the “great conflagration” or “conversion into fire” (*ekpurōsis*).

We may call the *ekpurōsis* the “eventual” rather than the final or ultimate return because, for the Stoics, it is not anything permanent. Rather, in cyclical fashion, the return or end merely serves as the beginning point for another production. “At certain periods of time, God absorbs into himself the whole

of substance and once again produces it from himself.”

What happens so that God the active principle absorbs everything into himself? To answer, let’s briefly review how the elements are generated. Initially, the divine, primordial fire (God-as-fire) is converted into water or moisture by means of the divine air (God-as-fire-breath). It is in this water that the rational, generative principle works to produce the four cosmic elements (matter). From the water comes earth (condensed water), air (rarefied water), and fire or aether (rarefied air). This water (whether the initial cosmic water or various forms of water found on earth in the guise of the sea and rivers and vapors rising therefrom) nourishes the realm of fire, that of the aether and the stars, doing so during the lengthy existence of the cosmos. Vapors rise up, nourish the fiery stars (including the sun), and they in turn shed water upon the earth in a cycle (or a re-cycle) that is almost perfectly sustainable.

Except it’s not. During every cycle, “a very small amount” of the moisture or water is lost to the fiery consumption of the stars and aether so that eventually the water is entirely used up. When this happens, the water will “neither be able to nourish the earth, nor

will the air go up since it cannot rise after the water is gone. In this way,” the Stoics conclude, “nothing will remain but fire.”

But this fire is God—Zeus, mind, reason, fate, the active principle. And so the cosmos inevitably forms again since this is what God does. God is by definition the active principle. Acting as fire, God becomes matter—water, earth, air, and fire, and everything formed from and with these—until the water is all used up and everything resolves once again into fire in an ever-recurring cycle—what some have termed the “eternal recurrence.”

The rational cosmos, human rationality, and the ethical imperative. We have learned that “the whole cosmos is a living and rational animal”; it is “rational and alive and endowed with sensation.” This is so because the divine mind extends through the whole cosmos, the active reason or *logos* within passive matter.

As for humans, we are rational insofar as our minds and reason participate in the life of the divine mind and reason. As we will see in the next section, the ethical imperative is to do so—that is, we must live according to reason and so be rational in all we feel, think, say, and do.

So ends this item. See you in **another reading or item** from the Cave.

NOTES

¹ For “*Natural philosophy or physics*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.132-134; Cicero, *On Ends* 3.73.

² The Greek word *kosmos* means, among other things, “order.”

³ For “*Nature*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.148; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.57-58, 81-83, 86.

⁴ Though Diogenes Laertius doesn’t spell it out, the point is significant. That nature “moves from itself” means that it is, among other things, a soul or soul itself since soul is, according to a tradition going back at least to Plato (see *Phaedrus* 245e), self-motion or that which moves from or by means of itself rather than by means of something else. As such, Diogenes Laertius will note that it is thanks to soul that we humans “are set in motion”—that is, our own soul, instead of something external to us, is the cause of our movement (see *Lives* 7.157: “Zeno of Citium and Antipater, in their treatises *On the Soul*, and Posidonius, say that the soul is a warm breath. For by this we are alive and breathe, and by it we are set in motion”).

⁵ Cicero is actually speaking of the “reality of the cosmos” here, but given the fact that the remark comes right after his discussion of nature as “craftsmanlike” and so on, he is clearly referring to the cosmos *as* nature. See *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.58. It is worth noting something else Cicero says about the cosmos, something that offers additional insight into the nature or meaning of “nature.” After stating that “Epicurus . . . divides the nature of all existing things into bodies, the void or emptiness, and their attributes,” he continues, “By contrast, when we Stoics say that the cosmos exists in accord with and is managed by nature, we do not mean it in the manner of Epicurus, as if the cosmos is like a lump of earth or a piece of rock or anything else that does

not have its own natural property of coherence. Instead, the cosmos is like a tree or an animal, in which nothing is accidental or arbitrary. Order is manifest, as well as something resembling art or craftsmanship" (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.82).

⁶ By the way, "earth" is not capitalized here or throughout the text (thought it could be as a proper noun) since it falls somewhere between an element ("earth") and our home planet ("the Earth"). Something like the same reasoning is behind the lack of capitalization for "sun" and "moon."

⁷ For the distinction, see Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.332. Sometimes the distinction is encompassed by one term alone: "As Apollodorus says, the all or totality of things (*to pan*) means, in one sense, the cosmos. In another sense it means the system composed of the cosmos and the external void. So then, the cosmos is finite, and the void is infinite" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.143).

⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.140.

⁹ For "The nature of the cosmos," see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.138-139, 140, 143; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.30, 36-39, 45; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 5.15.

¹⁰ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.47: "There are two forms that are more excellent than all others. Among solid forms there is the globe or sphere—for so we may translate the Greek *sphaera*. And among plane forms there is the circle or orbit—the Greek is *kyklos*. These two forms alone possess total uniformity in all their parts, and every point on the extremity or circumference is equally distant from the center. And there is nothing that can be better fitted or more compact than that."

¹¹ For the Stoic argument as to why the cosmos is destructible or perishable given the fact that it is generated, see Diogenes Laertius *Lives* 7.141.

¹² The contention that God or the gods lack nothing is evident from Homer (late eighth century BC) to the fourth century AD Basil of Caesarea (or someone who wrote *Letter* 366 in his name), who surmised, "God seems to be self-control because he desires nothing but has everything in himself"—that is, he lacks nothing, where desire is an indication or form of lacking.

¹³ One may protest that the cosmos contains many things that are not perfect. The Stoics would simply reply that such an observation is a matter of faulty judgment. Considering the elements out of which the cosmos is generated, it is "the best that could be produced." "Now the management of the cosmos contains nothing that may possibly be faulted. Given the natural elements, the best that could be produced from them has been produced. Let someone, therefore, show that the cosmos could have been better. But no one will ever show this. And anyone who wishes to improve some part of the cosmos will either make it worse or will be asking for something impossible given the nature of things" (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.86-87).

¹⁴ More specifically, it is the view of the Stoic Arius Didymus.

¹⁵ Keep in mind that aside from "principle," *archē* also means "beginning," "origin," or "cause." Consequently, "two principles" also means two beginnings, origins, or causes.

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.134. As are the two principles, so is everything in the cosmos corporeal or body (think body-stuff)—everything but for place, the void, time, and "things said" or "sayables."

¹⁷ For "The elements," see Diogenes Laertius *Lives*, 7.56, 136-137.

¹⁸ Compare Diogenes Laertius' statement that the passive principle "matter is that from which anything whatever is produced." He further reports that "the four elements together constitute substance without quality, that is, matter" (*Lives* 7.137).

¹⁹ For "The passive principle—substance or matter," see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.134, 137, 150.

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius elsewhere describes body as something that is extended in three ways—length, width, and height. See *Lives* 7.135.

²¹ Johannes Stobaeus reports the Stoic view that for a thing to exist means that it shares in substance: "Zeno says that whatever has a share in substance exists" (*Anthology* 2.5). Recall that substance is matter, as matter is "the substance of all things."

²² For "The active principle—God, reason, mind," see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.134-135, 137-138, 147; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.15; Cicero, *Academica* 1.39; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.18; Aetius 1.6; Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 3.218; Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus* 2 and 21. Note that "God" (*theos*) here refers to the one God, the one active principle—and so the capital G, though it could just as well be rendered with the lower case. As for reason (Reason) and mind (Mind) in reference to God, they are given with a lower case, though they could have also been given with capital letters.

²³ Aside from Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.15, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.148, "Zeno says that the substance of God is the whole cosmos and the heaven," and 7.137, "The term cosmos has three meanings. One meaning refers to God himself."

²⁴ It may be helpful to imagine the fire in a bronzesmith's workshop morphing into any number of crafted objects—a shield, a spear, greaves, cups, a plow, a bracelet—as the fire (the active principle) becomes one with the bronze (the passive principle).

²⁵ God may pervade even putrid things, but that does not mean that God is putridness, not to mention other things that are counted, at least in some ways, bad.

²⁶ The full text reads “perfect or intelligent in happiness” (see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.147). Some excise “intelligent” or “intellectual” (*noeros*—of or related to the intellect or mind, *nous*) as a later gloss (see Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, *The Stoics Reader*, 55). If retained, the “intelligent” happiness would refer to the fact that God’s happiness has to do with the intellect or mind; therefore, it is a rational rather than a merely emotional or passion-based happiness.

²⁷ For “*The production or generation of the cosmos*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.136-137, 142; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.57, 152.

²⁸ At this point we must admit that however much the outline of Stoic cosmology is clear from the sources we have, the details are, at times, less clear than we would like them to be.

²⁹ “In the beginning (*archē*)” may also be given as “In the origin.” Regardless, note the roundabout reference to the active principle (*archē*), the primordial state in which the two principles alone exist.

³⁰ And as good Stoics, if such we wish to be, we don’t have to pretend to have actual or complete knowledge here. Again, the details are not as clear as we’d like.

³¹ Since the Stoic language is not always consistent in discussing the active and passive principles in the production of the cosmos, it is impossible to describe their view with consistency using their own language. At times they speak as though God, the active principle, acts upon and transforms God. At others, it is clearly God producing from matter, the passive principle. The production of the cosmos is somewhat like a dance in which the two partners are so close that they can almost be spoken of interchangeably. Where there is one, there is the other. So if God transforms God, what is really meant is that the active principle transforms the passive principle.

³² For “*The arrangement of the cosmos and the things therein*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.137, 155; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.33-34 (for the hierarchy of nature), 42-43, 78, 84, 87, and Cicero, *On Ends* 3.62, 67; Eusebius, *Preparation of the Gospel* 15.15.

³³ Regarding the celestial circles, Diogenes Laertius adds, “First, there is the arctic circle, which is always visible. Second is the summer tropic. Third comes the circle of the equinox. Fourth, the winter tropic. Fifth, the antarctic, which is invisible to us” (*Lives* 7.155).

³⁴ Recall that the gods, as produced from God the active principle, can take on human form, whereas God the first principle does not since God is formless.

³⁵ Aside from Eusebius, see also Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists* 1.131: “The Stoics declare that humans have a certain just relation and interaction with one another and with the gods.”

³⁶ For “*The management of the cosmos and the things therein*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.61, 74, 138; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.75.

³⁷ Aside from Diogenes Laertius, see also Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.58, where “the cosmos itself” is termed “a craftsman”; it is “that which cares and looks out for the benefit and timeliness of everything.” See also Hippolytus, who states the Stoic position that God’s “providential care pervade[s] everything” (*Refutation of All Heresies* 1.18).

³⁸ For “*Against Epicureanism*,” see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.97, 113, 123, 139 (covering Epicurus); Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.59, 115. To read more about Epicurus and Epicureanism, see the Cave’s *The Best of Epicurus: The Life, Writings & Teachings of Epicurus the Greek Philosopher*.

³⁹ It is because of the difference between the Stoic and Epicurean positions regarding the gods and the management—or not—of the cosmos that we much later hear the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius repeatedly sound the refrains of “providence or chance” and “order or atoms” and “purpose or no purpose” in his Stoic-inspired meditations, *To Himself*. That is, there is either order and purpose thanks to providence or atoms move by chance with no purpose.

⁴⁰ For “*Arguments for divine providence and intelligent design*,” see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.78, 87, 93, 120. The argument in simple terms: If a thing demonstrates rational arrangement, then there is a rational arranger behind it. The cosmos is such a thing. Therefore, there is a rational arranger behind the cosmos.

⁴¹ This argument from Cicero is likely the source of the well-known argument having to do with monkeys and Shakespeare—that no matter how long one gives a roomful of monkeys to monkey around with typewriters, they will never type out even a single, coherent line from Shakespeare; so it is that this cosmos—with its intricate machinery (if we may call it such) from the stars and planets to DNA—cannot be the result of chance. For other examples of intelligent purpose or design, see *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.88 ff.

⁴² For “*The purpose of divine providence*,” see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.37, 58, 81, 127, 133, 166; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.15.

⁴³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.149. For the following discussion of fate, human freedom, and human responsibility, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.149; Cicero, *On Fate* 43; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 1.18.

What does it mean that all things are fated? And what does it mean for human beings in terms of freedom and responsibility?

First, a few definitions of fate. “Fate is defined as an ongoing string of things responsible for existing things.” Fate, then, is the cause of things, one thing after and related to another. More importantly, though, “Fate is the rational principle by which the cosmos produces.” So fate is not blind; it is the “string of things” marked by reason.

We may wonder, if everything is *rationally* fated, then are we humans free? And are we responsible for anything we do? Should we be praised or punished for anything? The Stoic reply is yes. We are free to make good or beneficial use of our human nature in response to various external events and internal impulses. Not only are we free to do so but we are responsible for making such a beneficial use. Failure to do so will result in various negatives—pain, suffering—that do not have to occur.

To understand, let’s take a look at the case of Zeno of Citium and his slave. The report is that “Zeno was once chastising a slave for stealing. When the latter said that he was fated to steal, Zeno replied, ‘Yes, and you are also fated to receive a beating.’” Was the slave, absolutely speaking, “fated to receive a beating”? No. The Stoics would say that he was only contingently fated to receive a beating. Since he stole, and since he was caught stealing, and since punishment usually follows upon getting caught, then, yes, he was “fated to receive a beating.”

But what if the slave had behaved otherwise? What if he had responded to the impulse to steal (presumably the desire to possess something valuable, pleasant, or beneficial) in line with human nature or reason? That is, what if he had responded rationally rather than impulsively? If he had, then the outcome—the fate—would have been very different.

As we’ve already learned, the Stoics believe that we humans naturally—by nature—act thanks to reason. That is, we are (fully) human only insofar as we act in line with reason. When we behave rationally, from and in line with reason, we behave as human beings. That stated, we are nevertheless moved by impulse. But this is merely our animal nature, the Stoics believe—something we share with animals. Consequently, just as animals are moved to behave in certain ways thanks to impulse or instinct (to eat and drink; to have sex; to possess valuable, pleasant, and beneficial things; to be in community; to defend possessions, territory, and community; and like things), so too are we humans moved to act in similar ways.

The big difference is reason. As the Stoics put it, “For those beings we call rational [that is, human beings], *the rational life* correctly became *the natural life* when reason was given to them by means of a more perfect rule. Reason was added to shape impulse as a skilled craftsman.” Accordingly, unlike animals who will, if they can, move and act in line with impulse, we humans can rationally respond to impulse by either giving in to it or refusing to give in. A wolf, for instance, will, driven by the impulse to eat, steal a farmer’s chicken. A hungry human, by contrast, will, in response to reason, refuse to take the property of another (this without getting into whether it is okay to take something for the sake of hunger). A male buffalo will, driven by the impulse to reproduce, fight for and mate with any and every female buffalo that is in heat. A male human will, in response to reason and even though he wishes to have sex with many females, restrain himself in order to have sex with the right female at the right time and place (to cite Aristotle).

So what’s the difference? What is fated and what is not? The simple answer: “All things happen by fate.” Yes all—but not really all. This is true because even though humans *as* humans are fated to possess reason, they are not fated to use reason *well* to “shape impulse as a skilled craftsman.” So there is this kind of shadowy realm of response, of choice, one that the early Stoics do not exactly—at least in sources we possess—expound at length, that involves making good use of human nature (reason) to respond well (rationally in line with virtue) to our animal nature (impulse), to assent or refuse to assent to impulse.

Using the analogy of an inanimate object, a roller, Chrysippus explains the two (rational nature and impulse) in terms of principal (or primary) and proximate (or secondary) causes. “In the same way, therefore, . . . as a man who has pushed a roller forward has given it a beginning of motion but has not given it its circular motion, so a presentation, when it occurs, will indeed impress or stamp itself and, as it were, seal its likeness or image on the rational soul, but assent will be in our power. It is as we declared in the instance of the roller: though given an external push [the proximate cause], as for the rest—its capacity to roll—the roller will move by its own power and nature [the principal cause].” Presentations or impulses (proximate causes)—say of a piece of chocolate cake or someone cutting us off in traffic or bad news—will inevitably occur. But, thanks to our rational nature (the principal cause), it is in our power to respond in one way or another to the impulse.

Impulses are inevitable but insufficient causes (for human beings). We humans necessarily and unavoidably experience a whole range of impulses all the time. Someone cuts us off in traffic. A colleague offers us a moist piece of chocolate cake. The Wi-Fi connection goes out. A classmate presents us with the key to the exam. We meet an attractive person other than the one we are committed to. A relative dies. Our host asks if we want another drink. We’re told we have cancer. And so on. Things like

this, and to one degree or another, happen every day. But they are, according to the Stoic understanding, only proximate or secondary causes. Even though they happen and may in some secondary sense *cause* us to respond or behave in a certain manner, they do not have the power to force us into any kind of behavior.

What is more important is the principal or primary cause, our rational human nature or reason. Whereas impulse is an inevitable but insufficient secondary cause, reason is, it seems, *not* inevitable insofar as we may or may not make use of reason. Nevertheless, if we make good use of reason, if we properly assent or refuse to assent to an impulse according to reason, then it is a sufficient cause. Said another way, reason empowers us to behave as humans and thus flourish as humans.

So as human beings, we are free since we possess reason, and reason gives us choice. Accordingly, we are responsible—or we are held responsible. The big question, then, whenever we are faced with inevitable impulses—ones that are often contrary to reason—is how we will respond. Will we respond like animals, always giving in to impulse if we can (that is, if we are in the position to)? Or will we only do so when it is right to do so, when it is good?

⁴⁴ For “*The destruction of the cosmos in the great conflagration*,” see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.118; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.134; Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 15.18.

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