

‘Without the Divine, there is no Stoicism’: by Nigel Glassborow

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Can Stoicism really be called Stoicism, without divinity? My aim in this piece is to show why you can’t take the divine out of Stoicism. This is quite a challenge seeing as how the whole of the teachings are based on an understanding of the Divine Fire, or more correctly ‘Phusis’ – that is Nature seen as ‘intelligent’ and ‘purposeful’. My apologies if I fall short of the task.

It cannot be enough to talk of virtue, striving for excellence and ethical theory. We need to see why we ought to choose the ‘life of good’ as is recommended by Stoicism together with all that implies. And the start of understanding not only why we should live the ‘good life’ but also the nature of the ‘good life’ is first of all an understanding as to how the Divine Fire manifests the whole Cosmos as the Oneness that it is.

Stoicism uses many words to describe and explain the many aspects of the living conscious Cosmos – however there is no separation between the Divine Fire, Phusis etcetera. The differing words are just human attempts to construct a framework of understanding – so if I shift between terminologies please follow Seneca’s advice and see past the words in order to see the whole picture. Stoic teachings are not to be understood by examining the individual words or ideas in isolation.

While Stoicism encourages the individual to think for themselves, key to being a Stoic is acceptance of the guidance to ‘Live in accord with Phusis’. The principle of the nature of the Divine Fire gives understanding as to Phusis being the intelligent and purposeful Whole of which we are a part – hence the idea that each individual is a ‘spark of the Divine Fire’.

Any attempt at a ‘therapeutic form’ of Stoicism will fall short of the mark if it ignores Stoicism proper and only looks to limiting itself to the range of Stoic practices that are meant to be used as a means to train oneself to be able to ‘habitualise’ the Stoic life. The practices were never meant to be used as a standalone ‘treatment’, and there certainly is no such thing as Stoic Mindfulness, this being an adoption from Buddhism and other life philosophy systems. (Although maybe I am being a little pedantic about the use of the word ‘mindfulness’. So as to avoid the connotations of Buddhist meditation and other such ideas that come with the modern use of the word, it is more accurate to talk of Stoic Attentiveness. Mindfulness has acquired connotations of looking into oneself, whereas, to my mind, attentiveness is more to do with looking outwards and seeing the bigger picture.) The thing is that the Stoic

‘practices/exercises’, without the rest of the teachings, are just CBT under a different title with all the limitations of CBT. It is known that CBT needs constant top-up sessions as its effects wane over time. (A search of the web will bring up many learned papers and articles to this effect.) This is because there is no ‘teaching’ as to one’s place within the Whole behind the practices being taught.

Many attempts to ‘restate’ Stoicism end up watering it down, especially where teachings that are contrary to atheistic ideas are ‘re-interpreted’ or omitted (presumably ‘in the interest of inclusivity’). It has been said to me that ‘people are free to incorporate theism into Stoicism if they wish to’. The Stoic pantheism that is the understanding of the Divine Fire is a teaching to be seen through all of the Stoas, so it is already incorporated into Stoicism. The Stoic theism where the Stoics of old recognised a ‘god’ is to be seen throughout the Classical writings – in fact part of what the Stoics of old were trying to do was to arrive at an understanding of man’s relationship to the ‘gods’. So it is not the case that ‘people are free to incorporate theism’ but rather that they are free to delude themselves by omitting it, which raises the question as to if they can then still call what they then follow Stoicism or call themselves Stoic if they reject the Divine Fire.

Stoicism is a life philosophy that combines knowledge and faith in order that we have a better understanding as to how to make the most of the life we have been given. It is ‘the philosophy of the sphere’. The Stoics of old recognised the sphere as the shape achieved when all the inward and outward forces were in balance – and they state that the Stoic philosophy is just such a balance. All the key teachings of Stoicism are needed if it is to continue to be ‘one of the loftiest and most sublime philosophies in the record of Western civilisation’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica). And that includes the ideas about the ‘Divine Fire’.

So down to business. Stoic ‘science’ is still valid in all of its key areas. Such was based on the ‘common perceptions’ of the day, logic and an element of faith. Compare this to today’s quantum science which is based on ‘imaginative’ mathematical equations, instruction to rewrite the rules of logic and an element of faith.

Modern science is looking to try to understand the construction and evolution of the Cosmos. Stoicism looks to trying to understand how the Cosmos is manifested here and now. In years gone by the Stoics saw the Cosmos as being manifested out of an ‘element’ they called the Divine Fire. Bear in mind that what they called an ‘element’ we would today more likely call a ‘property’, ‘quality’ or ‘state’.

To explain how the Cosmos is manifested it is seen that the Divine Fire had two indivisible aspects. There is the ‘passive principle’ that is matter without purpose – today this would more accurately be described as a sea of sub-atomic particles popping in and out of existence that are bashing around and not forming any of the

elements or forces that are necessary for all that exists today to actually exist. In fact scientists are claiming that just such a state existed soon after the supposed 'Big Bang'.

In order to explain how anything is manifested out of this sea of chaos, the Stoics talk of the 'active principle' – this is what causes the 'passive principle' to organise and manifest itself as all the individualisations within the Cosmos. Scientists have glimpsed some of the workings of the 'active principle' and they call them the 'laws of nature' and 'the laws of science'. The scientists recognise the need for order, and in their descriptions of the quantum universe they are hard pushed to explain it without reference to what some of them call 'the consciousness'. The Stoics describe this 'consciousness' as the active principle – that is, 'the universal governor and organiser of all things'.

I would emphasise that the consciousness that permeates the whole of existence is not consciousness as we know it. It is used by Stoics and scientists to describe something akin to human consciousness, but beyond full explanation. It describes an essential aspect needed to explain how the Cosmos is manifested.

As we are part of this manifestation, as individualisations within the sea of subatomic particles, so we are part of the Whole. As the Stoics of old describe it, we are each a 'spark of the Divine Fire', or as scientists poetically describe it, we 'are made out of stardust'.

It is not a case of 'why you can't take the divinity out of Stoicism'; it is more a case of Stoicism being to some degree irrelevant, for we are 'sparks' of the living Cosmos whether we like it or not. It is just that the Stoics had recognised the fact two millennia before it began to dawn on the scientists that there has to be an immanent 'consciousness' that permeates the whole of existence in order to explain how everything fits together.

When the scientists eventually overcome their problems of marrying 'matter' and 'forces' with 'the consciousness' there might be less antagonism towards the teachings of Stoicism in this area. Some are ahead of the game. Sir James Jeans [11 September 1877 – 16 September 1946, an English physicist and astronomer] on talking about Quantum Theory stated 'The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine.'

So we come to that little word that causes so much controversy – God. No, it is not a swear word as many seem to treat it. It is all a matter of definition, usage and baggage

As a result of the study of Quantum Theory, Martin Rees [Astronomer Royal] said: 'The universe could only come into existence if someone observed it.'

No longer is it a case that 'believers' are allowed to have 'the God of the gaps in the knowledge of science' with the idea that even these gaps would be closed in time so eliminating God. It is now becoming apparent in scientific circles that God, the consciousness, is a prerequisite for a full understanding of all that is around us and for it to be made manifest. God does not just fit in the 'gaps'. God/Phusis/the Divine Fire/the consciousness permeates the whole of existence.

We Stoics, as the Stoics of old did, look to the 'common perceptions' and to personal experience. Throughout the ages there have been many differing attempts to describe 'the consciousness' that is involved in the manifestation of the Cosmos. Stoics look to this and see a common theme running through all such attempts.

In the Judaic/ Christian/Islamic traditions and many others there is talk of the One God. Other traditions talk of many gods and others talk of some form of 'state of being'.

We Stoics recognise that the Cosmos is a living conscious singular state. For want of a better word the English word 'God' is as good a word as any other to describe and recognise that Phusis, that is Nature as a living conscious purposeful entity, operates on a rather larger scale than we do. It also recognises that we ought to show it some respect. All of this is why we are advised to live in accord with Nature (Phusis, God, the Logos or whatever you want to call it).

By Stoic teachings, 'God' is immanent for the Divine Fire manifests us through the quantum world moment by moment and so permeates our very being. And knowing this, that we are 'sparks of the Divine Fire', gives us cause to study and take on board the Stoic teachings in order that we may better harmonise with the Whole.

However coming back to the issue of 'common perceptions', it is recognised that the Wisdom of the Ages (to be found as a common theme throughout most faiths) encourages us to live a life of good rather than a life of selfish self-interest. We are expected to even rise above the drive of 'the selfish gene' and to see the imperatives of the 'God', the Whole, as our imperatives – we are asked to live in accord with Nature 'so doing none of those things which the common law of mankind is in the habit of forbidding' while striving to fulfil our rolls in life to the best of our abilities.

Why? Because we are one with the Whole, so what harm we do to the whole we do to ourselves and what harm we do to ourselves we do to the whole. We may view in isolation what we see as our interests, but to do so is to bring about disharmony. We Stoics are taught that our interests have to harmonise with the interests of the Whole. Not just that of our family, our tribe, our society etcetera, but that of the whole Cosmos at all of its levels. Stoics are taught to be selfish through selflessness. If it is in the interests of the Whole then it is in our interest. Even to the point that we must be prepared to sacrifice ourselves if necessary.

From the understanding of the Divine Fire comes the rest of the teachings to help the Stoic through the good times and the tough times. Stoicism will offer little help if it is treated as a coat that one can put on and take off as needed. Unlike CBT which aims to make a person 'feel better' about themselves at a particular time and place, Stoicism helps the Stoic all of the time to be as contented as possible with whatever is thrown at them for they will be looking to the bigger picture.

Stoicism is a philosophy for life (and death). It teaches an understanding of our place within the Whole. It teaches about human nature and ethics. It teaches us about our relationship to the One God, the manifestor and sustainer of existence. It then offers some practices/exercises so as to enable the habitualisation of the thought processes needed to enable the living of a contented life while also living an honourable life in harmony with the Whole.

So it is that the Divine Fire is the starting point for understanding all of the teachings. Until one understands the very foundation of the Stoic framework one cannot start to understand one's place in life. And it is through understanding one's place in life that a life of contentment (eudaimonia) can be achieved.

About the author: At 68 years old I have been a Stoic philosopher for the last 25 years, having discovered that I had been a Stoic long before I ever read about Stoicism. Instead of trying to 'modernise' and dumb down the Stoic teachings I have tried to look to the original intent of the teachings and to compare this with what present day science is leading us towards and have found no real conflict. I follow Seneca's advice not to get hung up on the individual words but to look to the teachings as a whole and as such hold to the fact that Stoicism is theistic in nature and would be incomplete if it is stripped down to satisfy the atheistic fad of the modern age.