

Restating Stoicism – not reinventing it by Nigel Glassborow March 2019 thestoahotmail.co.uk

My writings tend to meet with objections because of the way I express matters. While we are told by Seneca that each Stoic needs to bring a piece of themselves to their understanding of what Stoicism involves, I speak and write with a certainty that others are sometimes uncomfortable with.

As a result of my experiences of something akin to Socrates' daimonion I have a certainty about the immanence of God as understood by Stoicism.

As a result I also have a certainty about the soundness of the Stoic metaphysics in that, through looking to what the world faiths and what the modern sciences tell us, I arrived at my understanding of the 'three prime dimensions' of Space, Movement and Consciousness that are aspects of the processes behind the manifestation of the Cosmos – only to be led to a book on Stoicism where I discovered that Zeno had been there before me. I found that I had rediscovered Stoicism's metaphysics including its belief that the prime dimension of Consciousness (the active principle) is to be equated with the realisation that God permeates the whole Cosmos, albeit that I was restating the Stoic metaphysics in light of the advances in knowledge up to today's times.

This certainty leads me to agree with the classic Stoic stance that Stoicism offers us a complete guide to living life if and only if we buy into its faith and metaphysics in that this is the foundation to the Stoic mantra – 'to live in accord with Nature' where, according to Stoicism, Nature is the oneness that is the living Cosmos, the body of God, out of which we and all around us are manifested.

It is no coincidence that the modern use in Stoicism of the word Nature with a capital 'N' is a translation of the Greek 'Phusis' which is the root from which our modern word 'physics' comes. For the Stoics, 'Phusis' is Nature seen as the living evolving state that is forever being manifested here and now by God and it is only through looking to what God is manifesting that we can learn how to live.

As such Nature, Phusis or the physics of life is what is behind the rationale that leads to the Stoic ethics – where 'ethics' relates to the 'ethos' of the Stoic. That is, the 'nature, disposition and habituated customs' of an individual that understands their place in the scheme of things. The Stoic ethics is about how the Stoic will live, where such is based on the Stoic faith, metaphysics and the nature of the Existence which we find all around us.

As a result of all of the above I go against the modern trend of trying to extract parts of the Stoic training and calling it Stoicism. I hold to the classic Stoic stance that says Stoicism is a complete whole where its understanding of Nature ('Phusis'), its consequential rationale and its ethos are one. As Professor Gilbert Murray tells us, along with Zeno we need to know what to believe in order to know how to live. Murray also tells us that:

[Stoicism] '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.' [Gilbert Murray a classical scholar and Professor of Greek at Oxford University. From his lecture which was originally presented at the South Place Institute in London on 16th March 1915]

And as Professor A A Long tells us:

'If as I have as I have claimed, determinism and providence are crucial features of that view, any attempt to elucidate Stoic ethics that ignores these features will be broken-backed' [Page 201, Chapter 8 'Stoic Eudaimonism' of 'Stoic Studies' by A A Long, 1996 Cambridge University Press]

Along with the Stoics of old, renowned experts in the study of Stoicism confirm the classic Stoic take that the ethos of the Stoic is to be firmly grounded in the Stoic faith in an imminent and providential God that is manifesting the world about us, moment by moment. And Epictetus could be no clearer – the Stoic's ethos is to align their will with the will of God.

So I hold to the classic Stoic principle that the edifice that is Stoicism will not stand unless its three legs (its physics, its rationale and its ethics) are all in place. Remove one and the edifice falls.

This may make me a 'fundamentalist' in some people's eyes, but such also makes Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius 'fundamentalists' in that they all followed the fundamentals of Stoicism.

So, in my interpretation of Stoicism I try to stay true to the rationale of the classic Stoicism as originally introduced by Zeno. I also try to consider such against the advances in knowledge since Zeno's time, while often finding much in modern thinking that supports and confirms the Stoic stance on many issues.

In looking to the Stoic principles afresh, starting with the basics and adding in the new knowledge and ways of describing and expressing things today, I find it sensible to try to offer a new conversation on how we can describe and explain many of the Stoic ideas in a manner that will be more understandable to the populous today.

This may offend many who want to hold to certain ways of saying things as has become the 'orthodoxy' of today. However, in his day, Zeno offered a teaching that was meant to be suitable for the person in the street. Matters became more complicated and technical as Zeno and his followers tried to explain their ideas to the more intellectual schools in Athens and so we ended up with all sorts of technical terminology and logical arguments that make Stoicism appear in places to be counter-intuitive, dogmatic and the province of an elite.

I aim to try to talk non-technically about the whole nature of Stoicism, including its metaphysics and its reliance on understanding the nature of life. I aim to take the rationale

of the classic Stoic beliefs and wisdom and to state such anew in order to maintain an understanding of how we ought, as Stoics, to habituate ourselves regards trying to live a life of 'good' whereby we 'live in accord with Nature' in all of its guises. And here the act of habituating ourselves is what is meant by 'ethics' – the Stoic ethics often being seen as the prime interest of many a would-be-Stoic.

However, in being true to Zeno and classic Stoicism, it is a Stoic principle that our ethos, our habituated way of acting, is dependent on our understanding of the physics of life – both the nature of the life we are living here on Earth and the nature of our relationship to the Cosmos as a whole, a Cosmos that is the body of God. This is all part of the Stoic rationale that ties the Stoic ethics firmly to the Stoic physics.

The rationale of Stoicism means that the Stoic mind training, that is often taken for all there is to the 'ethics', is not the Stoic 'ethics' if taken in isolation. To have a chance of understanding Stoicism, just as was the case two millennia ago, one needs to gain an understating of the physics of life as Stoicism sees it. The Stoic ethics are only to be perceived through an understanding of the Stoic physics and metaphysics.

Just as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is grounded in similar mind training as is on offer in the Stoic teachings, it is to be applauded if the Stoic mind training helps an individual to better cope with life. However, to be a Stoic of the classic vein, to be a Stoic that walks side by side with Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius and all the other Stoics of old, requires immersion in the whole of Stoicism - the physics, the rationale and the ethos. It requires a belief in the Stoic understanding of the nature of the Cosmos and the God that manifests it as the body of God.