

Providence or Atoms

A Very Brief Defense of the Stoic Worldview

by Christopher Fisher

If I know Providence, I know my good and can follow it; so, no complaint. If I know not my good, I do not in reality know Providence. So if I complain, I complain of a specter and not a Deity: I complain as an animal, not as a man.

~ Antony, Earl of Shaftesbury¹

Either providence or atoms. By repeated use of this simple disjunction, Marcus Aurelius condensed and contrasted the worldviews proposed by the Stoics and the Epicureans, and emphasized the importance of the choice for those who wish to live according to Nature. Marcus understood what many modern readers of Stoicism overlook: the choice between these opposing worldviews has psychological and ethical implications for anyone attempting to live the excellent and flourishing life described by the Stoics.

The division between the Stoics and Epicureans over the nature of the cosmos is renowned. This was not a sterile academic debate over the minutia of philosophical terms or concepts. It was a deep divide over how one should view the cosmos and live in it as a rational being. Each argued forcefully for their own worldview because they believed there were consequences to the lives of their practitioners. The chasm between the providentially ordered cosmos of the Stoics and the random atomic universe of the Epicureans was deep and wide, and it could not be bridged. Thus, as Marcus asserts, one must make a choice between them—either providence or atoms.

For the Epicureans, acceptance of providence invited the gods into the lives of humans, and this they believed was a primary source of psychological distress. Conversely, for the Stoics, a rational and providential cosmos provided psychological and emotional support which helped them live virtuously and flourish regardless of external circumstances. The Stoics revered an immanent God as the providential force within Nature; the Epicureans regarded the gods as disquieting intruders in our lives and celebrated their disinterest in human affairs. The difference between these worldviews is insurmountable; additionally, as Marcus Aurelius makes quite clear with his repeated use of the disjunction 'providence or atoms,' the Stoics considered the choice important.

¹ Rand, B. (2005). *The life, unpublished letters and philosophical regimen of Antony, Earl of Shaftesbury*. London: Adamant Media Corp. p. 44

What is Providence?

Our English word *providence* is derived from the Latin word *providentia*. Cicero and Seneca used *providentia* to translate the Greek word *pronoia* (*προνοια*).

Christopher Gill defines *pronoia* as 'providential rationality and care.'² F. E. Peters defines *pronoia* as 'forethought' or 'providence,' and writes,

"The early history of the concept of providence is to be seen in the emergence, from Diogenes to Aristotle, of a notion of intelligent purpose (*telos*, q.v.) operating in the universe. In all of these thinkers it is clearly associated with the intelligent God whose features begin to appear in the later Plato... and in Aristotle. For the Stoics the immanent *Logos* governs all by *nous* and *pronoia* (D.L. VII, 138; SVF I, 176)."³

Providence entails the causal determinism of the mechanistic worldview used by modern sciences. Causal determinism is an ancient concept which simply means every event is necessitated by prior (antecedent) events. Stoics refer to this as a causal chain or web. Providence infers divine cause and purpose to this chain of events. Therefore, there are no accidents or miracles; just causes, which rely on prior causes, which ultimately rely on God as the ultimate cause.

Providence and Stoicism

Edward Arnold offers a beautiful portrait of providence within Stoicism,

It is a principal dogma of the Stoics that 'the universe is ruled by providence.' Cicero indeed assures us that the word 'providence' is merely an abbreviation for 'the providence of the gods,' and that the dogma really asserts that 'the universe is ruled by the gods with foresight'... If 'providence' is on the one hand interpreted as God's providence, it is on the other hand equivalent to Nature, and again to the Mind of the universe; it is the *Logos*, the universal Law, the creative force; not merely an attribute, but a manifestation and bodily presentment of deity.⁴

2 Gill, C. (2013) *Marcus Aurelius Meditations, Books 1-6*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 90

3 Peters, F. (1967) *Greek Philosophical Terms*, New York: New York University Press, p. 164

4 Arnold, E. (1911) *Roman Stoicism*, Cambridge, MA: The University Press, pp. 203-4

Providence is central to Stoicism. Without providence, Stoic ethical theory loses much of its coherence, and the psychological consolations of its therapeutic practices are greatly diminished. Marcus Aurelius understood its importance, and accepted the Stoic worldview, which includes a rationally ordered and providential cosmos.

Additionally, Marcus relied on the Stoic theory of psychology, which asserts that our emotions are connected to our value judgments. Therefore, he understood how one's accepted worldview can affect their judgments of events in the world. In his *Meditations*, Marcus links acceptance of a providential worldview to a 'cheerful mind' (2.3) and sees within it a call to action (2.4). Again, in *Meditations* 4.3.5, he suggests our resentment of the circumstance of our lives is the result of denying providence.⁵

Likewise, Seneca emphasized providence by highlighting the causal link between the trials we face in life and the development of our personal virtue. Thus, Seneca declares, "Fire tests gold, misfortune brave men"⁶ as a source of consolation and inspiration for those who undergo seeming misfortunes in life. Approximately ten years prior to Seneca's death a young slave was born in Asia Minor who would be tested by those fires of providence. His name was Epictetus, and he did indeed prove to be gold. As a result of his trials, Epictetus would come to esteem the subject of providence above all others.⁷

The philosophers say that the first thing that needs to be learned is the following, that there is a God, and a God who exercises providential care for the universe... (*Discourses* 2.14.11)

Epictetus also provides a defense of providence by linking it to his distinction between what is 'up to us' and 'not up to us.'

What are we to do, then? To make the best of what lies within our power, and deal with everything else as it comes. 'How does it come, then?' As God wills. (*Discourses* 1.1.17)

A strong reliance on providence was not unique to Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius. Quite the contrary. If anyone doubts the importance of providence in Stoicism consider the criticism offered by Plutarch,

⁵ See Gill (2013) p. 121, for a superb analysis of this passage.

⁶ *On Providence* 5.10

⁷ Dobbins, R. (1998) *Epictetus Discourses Book 1*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 101

...that the universal nature and the universal reason of nature are destiny and providence and Zeus, of this not even the Antipodes are unaware, for the Stoics keep harping on this everywhere...⁸

Plutarch complained that even those residing in the farthest corners of the earth had heard the Stoic arguments for providence, since they harped on them everywhere.

The debate over these opposing worldviews divided Hellenistic thinkers and philosophical schools. Moreover, history records the influence of this debate on Western thought since that time; it predates the Stoics and Epicureans and still reverberates just below the surface of thought and culture today.

For most people, however, providence is a foreign concept. It became a casualty of Western thought during the progression from the Enlightenment to modernity.⁹ While the concept of providence is pervasive in the extant Stoic texts, and was the subject of several lost Stoic books, today one is unlikely to confront this concept outside of a seminary. Modern scientists and philosophers rely on the concept of causal determinism. Nevertheless, most reject teleology and the concept of a providential cosmos.

The Stoics recognized there is an intelligence in the order of the cosmos which infers meaning to our lives. Unfortunately, this idea is not given consideration by the majority of moderns studying and practicing Stoicism. Thus, the twenty-first century popularization of Stoicism is occurring without any discussion of providence in spite of the fact that this concept was traditionally considered essential. In part, this is a byproduct of our secular age.¹⁰ The concept of providence evokes religious connotations and turns many moderns away without further consideration. Additionally, many modern popularizers of Stoicism are themselves atheists and are therefore steering modern Stoicism away from its foundational teachings in physics and theology and toward a recently envisioned secularized version of Stoic ethics. This is unfortunate primarily because providence plays a central role in Stoic practice and psychological well-being.

Certainly, one can benefit from the ethical practices of Stoicism without consideration of the Stoic worldview in general, or providence in particular. The creators and practitioners of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy (REBT) and Cognitive

8 Cherniss, H. (1976) (ed.) *Plutarch Moralia*, xiii, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1050A-B

9 See Lloyd (2008), for a brilliant historical analysis of the demise of providence in western philosophical thought.

10 See Taylor (2007), for a thorough exposition of our current times, how we arrived here, and what it means.

Behavioral Therapy (CBT) have aptly demonstrated that fact. Nevertheless, it appears the Stoics believed their conception of a providential cosmos fortified the thought changing power, and life changing effectiveness of their therapeutic practices. The extant texts support the idea that a proper understanding of providence will help the Stoic practitioner extinguish anger, overcome discontent with their life circumstances, and thereby help them develop the virtue necessary for a good flow in life (*eudaimonia*). There is no reason why modern Stoics cannot benefit in the same way.

Why Providence is Important

The concept of a providential cosmos provides psychological comfort and supports the ethical framework of Stoicism. When the threads of providence are unraveled from the fabric of Stoicism, the whole tapestry begins to fall apart, and the practitioner is left without the essential therapeutic tools the Stoics thought were necessary to face the vicissitudes of life.

The connection between modern cognitive therapies, such as CBT, and Stoicism is well documented.¹¹ Moreover, the connection between a person's worldview and their perception of events is understood by CBT practitioners. As Jean-Baptiste Gouryat explains, cognitive therapy is based on three hypotheses, the first of which is, "one's behavior springs from one's view of oneself and the world, and our psychological difficulties and disturbances derive from these views and from our (misconceived) perception of external events."¹² The Stoics also understood this connection, and relied a providential cosmos as the foundation for their therapeutic practices. Thus, Marcus could make the connection between an emotional state of discontent with life's circumstances, and trust in a providential cosmos.

But perhaps you are discontented with what is allotted to you from the whole? Then call to mind the alternative, 'either providence or atoms' and all the proofs that the universe should be regarded as a kind of constitutional state.
(*Meditations* 4.3.5)

Christopher Gill suggests that Marcus repeats the 'providence or atoms' disjunction in the above passage, "and sometimes elsewhere" in *Meditations*, "simply to reassure himself of the providential nature of the universe (that it is a 'kind of city'), as assumed

11 Robertson, D. (2010). *The philosophy of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)*, London: Karnac

12 Gourinat, J. (2009). *Stoicism Today*. IRIS, 1(2), p. 510.

in Stoic theory"¹³ and "to reaffirm his conviction in the Stoic world-view and thus provide himself with ethical and emotional support."¹⁴

Epictetus' Prescription for Psychological Resilience

Epictetus' Discourse, *On Providence*, opens with a powerful prescription for psychological resilience.

From everything that happens in the universe it is easy to praise providence, if one has within him two things: the faculty of taking a comprehensive view of the things that happen to each person and a sense of gratitude. (*Discourses* 1.6)

Here, Epictetus prescribes two qualities one must develop for psychological resilience. The first involves taking a "comprehensive view of things that happen." This 'view from above' allows us to consider events from the perspective of the whole rather than from our own individual self-interest. Once we understand the nature of the cosmos and our place in it, we begin to understand that external events are neither good nor bad, in a moral sense, because they are beyond our control. The only events which have moral implications for us are those we can control—our judgments. External events cannot harm our inner *Self*; only our thoughts about events can.

The second part of Epictetus' prescription involves developing a "sense of gratitude" for everything that happens. Stoicism does not promote a shallow Pollyanna attitude which attempts to put a positive spin on events. Instead, the Stoic concept of providence offers insight and meaning about the nature of reality and human existence. The cosmic perspective helps us deal with life's tragedies. How? By teaching us to take control of what is 'up to us'—our judgments of events—and to love and praise what we cannot control—our fate.

Gratitude is what distinguishes a love of one's fate from resignation and fatalism. There is no resignation in Seneca, Epictetus, or Marcus because each embraced fate with a sense of gratitude and used it to fulfill their unique mission in life. This sentiment is eloquently expressed by Marcus Aurelius:

Everything suits me that suits your designs, O my universe.

¹³ Gill (2013), p. 121

¹⁴ Ibid, p. lxix

Nothing is too early or too late for me that is in your own good time. All is fruit for me that your seasons bring, O nature. (Meditations 4.23)

Life is often challenging and we do not control the circumstances we face; however, we do control our thoughts about those circumstances. Trials can make us bitter or they can make us better. The choice is ours. The analogy of a dog tied to a cart is prevalent in Stoic literature. However, our tendency is to focus on the dog being compelled or dragged, rather than on the freedom the dog has to willingly follow.

They too [Zeno and Chrysippus] affirmed that everything is fated, with the following model. When a dog is tied to a cart, if it wants to follow it is pulled and follows, making its spontaneous act coincide with necessity, but if it does not want to follow it will be compelled in any case. So it is with men too: even if they do not want to, they will be compelled in any case to follow what is destined.¹⁵

In this analogy, freedom can only be found by following where fate leads. By willingly following the cart, the dog creates slack in the rope which affords it freedom to move within the constraints of the rope's length. Alternatively, if the dog resists, it will be dragged, yelping all the way. Analogously, our freedom comes from willingly following fate. By accepting the constraints determined by Nature and human nature, we discover the freedom of our unique individual nature and thereby become coauthors of our destiny. Or, we will be dragged through life, yelping all the way.

O ME! O LIFE!

Those words from Walt Whitman's poem of the same title, have echoed in the minds of countless people who have questioned the meaning of life. Many of us have expressed a similar feeling at one time or another. Often, it is simply giving voice to a momentary frustration. Occasionally however, circumstances overwhelm us and the initial lament—"O me! O life!"—reverberates and develops into an agonizing and soul-searching questions, "Why me? Why this life?"

Trust in a providential cosmos provides consolation for those who have felt the angst of Whitman's refrain, by shining a light into the darkness of the existential abyss and allowing us to find purpose and meaning in our life. Whitman's own answer is his poetic refrain is profound:

15 Long, A. A., & Sedley, D. N. (1990). *The Hellenistic philosophers*. Cambridge: University Press, 62A

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a
verse.¹⁶

We do not get to pick all the actors or write many of the lines in our play. We do not know how long we will be on stage, nor do we know how many of the scenes will be tragic or comedic. Nevertheless, the powerful play goes on and is incomplete without our participation. Nature casts each of us in a unique role where we may contribute a verse. Or, we can stomp our feet and cry because we do not like the play, or our role:

I don't want a supporting role, I want the lead role!

— Then you will lament, and have a troubled mind.¹⁷

I don't want these actors around me, I want different actors!

— Then you will lament, and have a troubled mind.

I don't think what happens to my character is fair!

— Then you will lament, and have a troubled mind.

Providence requires our willing participation so we can become what Nature intends. As Epictetus points out in *Discourses* 1.6, Hercules was molded by his challenges. Without the lion, hydra, boar, and the unjust and brutal men, Hercules' true nature would never have been known; those trials revealed his greatness. Likewise our trials will mold us and reveal our excellence of character. That is, if we focus on what is 'up to us' and trust the rest to a providential cosmos.

Come now, haven't you been endowed with faculties that enable you to bear whatever may come about? Haven't you been endowed with greatness of soul? And with courage? And with endurance? If only I have greatness of soul, what reason is left for me to be worried about anything that may come to pass? What can disconcert or trouble me, or seem in any way distressing? Shall I fail to apply my capacities to the end for which I have received them, but instead groan and lament about things that come about? (*Discourses* 1.6.28-29)

In another passage, Epictetus likens providence to a trainer who prepares us for life's hardship.

16 Whitman, W. (1993) *OH ME! OH LIFE!*, Leaves of Grass, New York: Random House, p. 221

17 see *Enchiridion* # 1, for the consequences of desires and aversions which are 'not up to us.'

It is difficulties that reveal what men amount to; and so, whenever you're struck by a difficulty, remember that God, like a trainer in the gymnasium, has matched you against a tough young opponent.

'For what purpose?' someone asks.

So that you may become an Olympic victor; and that is something that can't be achieved without sweat. It seems to me that no one has had a difficulty that gives a better opportunity than the one you now have, if only you're willing to tackle it as an athlete tackles his young adversary. (*Discourses* 1.24.1-2)

Providence or Atoms Today

Marcus Aurelius repeatedly reminded himself of the difference between the Stoic and Epicurean worldviews because he understood the choice between them made an important difference in his life. Our understanding of Nature has increased exponentially since the Hellenistic Age. Nevertheless, we face the same essential choice today—either providence or atoms? Either the cosmos is rationally ordered and providential; or, is it the result of meaningless, serendipitous, chance. Many mistakenly assume this is a religion versus science debate; it is not. One need not subscribe to any religion to assent to the idea of a rational, providential cosmos.

While Stoicism was a spiritual practice for the ancient Stoics, it bears no similarity to traditional religion beyond personal piety toward God. Stoicism is a philosophical system meant to be lived as a way of life. While some of its therapeutic practices are spiritual in nature, the path of Stoicism involves internal comprehension and coherence with Nature, rather than conversion and conformity to dogma. The philosophical God of Stoicism is not our grandfather's God. Stoics trust in the rationality of their minds rather than revelation.

Human psyches need to be tethered to something lest they risk drifting aimlessly into the dark abyss of meaninglessness. Even some atheists are beginning to openly acknowledging that we are in need of something to fill the 'existential vacuum'¹⁸ left by the nineteenth century death of God.

As Sam Keen observed,

We exist in a God-shaped vacuum. That which is no longer present (but is not completely absent) gives shape to our aspirations and longings.

18 Frankl, V (1992). *Man's search for meaning*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press

Although longing seems to be perennial, the historical tide of faith ebbs and flows. Currently in the industrialized nations it seems to have receded, depositing its driftwood of nihilism and violence on the shore, leaving us devoid of a vision of the sacred that we need in order to create a hopeful society. We suffer from a spiritual autoimmune disease. Lacking antibodies of faith to keep us from despair, we attack ourselves.¹⁹

Keen further warned,

"It is doubtful that the imperatives springing from modern secularism can create a civil community... I can't help wondering if the idea of a secular civilization is an oxymoron, a failed dream of the Enlightenment."²⁰

Sam Keen is not alone in his concern. The chorus of atheist and humanist voices, calling for something more than unbelief, has risen to a crescendo in recent decades. This is apparent from the titles of recently published books: *In the Absence of God; Religion for Atheists; Religion Without God; The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*; etc. Even Sam Harris, one of the 'Four Horsemen' of New Atheism, recently published, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. Harris is still opposed to traditional religions; yet, he reveals an epiphany he had about the ruins of those religions, "I now understood that important psychological truths could be found in the rubble."²¹ Moreover, he now concedes, "there is more to understanding the human condition than science and secular culture generally admit."²²

At the dawn of this new millennium, many people are becoming aware of the existential vacuum we successfully ignored in the past. This may, in part, explain the recent widespread interest in Stoicism in the west, where an Epicurean mindset formerly reigned supreme. It appears the veneer of meaning left behind by our religious traditions is beginning to crack, and nihilism is leaching into our individual psyches and collective *zeitgeist*. Our "unacknowledged inheritance from a rich godfather"²³ has been spent; we are now spiritually bankrupt and forced to support our own psychological well-being without the ability to do so. Unexpectedly, many of us find ourselves vulnerable and longing for more than unbelief. Yet, we cannot return to the intellectual

19 Keen, S. (2010) *In the Absence of God*, New York: Harmony Books, pp. 3-4

20 Ibid, p. 12

21 Harris, S. (2014) *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 5

22 Ibid, p. 6

23 Keen, p. 12

bondage of traditional religions our Enlightenment ancestors freed us from.

Fortunately, Stoicism offers us a way forward. It provides a meaningful, spiritual alternative without the supernaturalism, revelation, and dogma of traditional religion. Stoicism guides us along an ancient path, which circumnavigates the existential abyss of meaninglessness without requiring abdication of our rational mind. It begins by teaching us to use our rational faculty to distinguish between what is 'up to us' and what is not. Circumstances beyond our control can take away our wealth, health, good reputation, and loved ones. However, circumstances cannot affect our psychological well-being if we learn to judge them properly as things 'not up to us.'

Once we understand the irrationality of attempting to control what is not up to us, we can begin to consider the path pointed to by the Stoics. At the beginning of the path we will need to get a clear picture of our human nature, and our unique individual nature. Next, we must excavate our desires and aversions since these distract us from the pursuit of our primary goal—the attainment of an excellent (virtuous) life.

Finally, we must grasp our expanded role as citizens of the cosmos. We are individuals; however, we are also interdependent social beings. Each of us is a part of the whole and virtue cannot be developed in isolation. Therefore, to practice the virtues of practical wisdom, temperance, courage, and justice, each of us must live in society as a friend, partner, spouse, parent, responsible citizen, etc.

The deep spiritual practice of Stoicism depends on trust in a providential cosmos. While the concept of providence is not difficult to grasp, many moderns attempting to practice Stoicism will find it difficult to assent to. Regrettably, many object to providence without giving it full consideration. This may be due to its religious implications, or because they simply do not realize how essential providence is to Stoic ethical theory and practice.

Trust in providence allows us to take a step back from our circumstances and view the whole of our life from a distance. We are often unable to see the whole picture because we are too close—too focused on the individual events. When we step back, a different picture begins to emerge. The threads of painful events and difficult circumstances are still there; yet, they are woven into the tapestry of our life. This perspective of the whole allows our judgments of the parts to dissolve into equanimity.

Additionally, this panoramic view of our whole life, allows us to see the causal chain of providence playing itself out. We begin to understand how each of those events was a necessary causal link in the story of our life; they are now part of the person we have become. More importantly, a view of the whole may reveal a trajectory to our life we did not see before, and this may open our minds to new possibilities for our future.

The Stoic providential worldview deserves our honest consideration because of its inherent psychological power to change our lives. Providence can be a big pill to swallow for moderns because the concept is foreign to our secular age. Thus, we often resist fate and allow bitter circumstances to sit on our tongue like a dissolving pill, a little too long. We refuse to swallow until the bitterness becomes so unpleasant we cannot do otherwise. As a result, we often become discontented and angry about the circumstances of our lives.

Stoicism teaches us there is a better way. We can choose to follow the cart of fate willingly, with gratitude for the life we have been given. We can take control of what is 'up to us' and leave the rest to providence. Or, we can continue to get dragged through life yelping all the way. The choice is ours and the choice is critically important to our psychological well-being.

Either providence or atoms.

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