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**Title**

Living on the Edge

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7f52h3sm>

**Journal**

Classical Antiquity, 39(2)

**ISSN**

0278-6656

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**Publication Date**

2020-12-22

**DOI**

10.1525/ca.2020.39.2.225

Peer reviewed



## Living on the Edge: Self and World in *extremis* in Roman Philosophy

Roman Stoicism is typically read as a therapeutic philosophy that is centered around the care of the self and presented in the form of a self-help manual. Closer examination reveals a less reassuring and more challenging side to the school's teachings, one that provokes ethical reflection at the limits of the self's intactness and coherence. The self is less an object of inquiry than the by-product of a complex set of experiences in the face of nature and society and across any number of flashpoints, from one's own or others' beliefs, actions, values, and relationships to the difficulty of sizing up one's place in the universe. The pressures of natural and ethical reflection put intuitive conceptions of the self at considerable risk. The Roman Stoic self proves to be vulnerable, contingent, unbounded, relational, and opaque—in short, a rich matrix of problems that point beyond the individual self and anticipate contemporary critiques of the self.

KEYWORDS: self, third-person, Lucretius, L. Annaeus Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Epicureanism, Stoicism, natural philosophy, ethics, contemporary critical theory

You have to begin by analyzing the third person. One speaks, one sees, one dies. There are still subjects, of course—but they're specks dancing in the dust of the visible and permutations in an anonymous babble. The subject's always something derivative. It comes into being and vanishes in the fabric of what one says, what one sees.

Gilles Deleuze<sup>1</sup>

The self in Roman philosophy is a booming area of research in Classics today. Historical curiosity and academic fashion are undeniable factors, but they hardly tell the whole story. Similar kinds of inquiry into the self are likewise flourishing in

For Mark Griffith—moral tutor, teacher, colleague, friend.

1. Deleuze 1995: 108.

philosophy, in the history of thought, and in popular culture. But the Roman perspective, and Roman Stoicism in particular, has enjoyed an unusual resurgence. One possible explanation is that the writings of the three ~~principle~~ principal exponents of Stoicism under Rome—Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius (and, to a lesser degree, Musonius Rufus)—happen to be seductive, easily accessible, and more or less completely preserved, unlike the fragmentary and at times forbiddingly academic remains of Zeno, Chrysippus, and Cleanthes, the school's founders. Focused on practical rather than technical issues and attentive to their own praxis as literary works meant to be heard or overheard by readers, the Roman texts have a moving simplicity and directness to them that makes them feel like living documents even today. You don't need a lot of explanatory footnotes and commentary to hear their authors' admonishing and encouraging voices in your ear. But above all, they preach good news.

principal

Read as self-help manuals, these Roman writings have given rise to popular titles like *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*; *How to Think Like an Emperor: The Stoic Philosophy of Marcus Aurelius*; and *A Handbook for New Stoics: How to Thrive in a World Out of Your Control; 52 Week-by-Week Lessons*. Another strand of contemporary Neostoicism fastens onto the grit-and-bear-it face of Stoic ethics, for example *Courage Under Fire: Testing Epictetus's Doctrines in a Laboratory of Human Behavior*, and *Stoic Warriors: The Ancient Philosophy Behind the Military Mind*. And although Lucretius, the most accessible guide to Epicurean atomism, has likewise attracted increased attention over the past few decades, he has not enjoyed anywhere near the same degree of interest that the Roman Stoics have, and he has certainly not made it onto the non-academic best-seller lists. A self-help manual or embattled warrior handbook modelled on the rebarbative teachings of ancient atomism, no matter how honeyed the rim may be, is simply hard to imagine. And in any case, Epicureanism counsels turning attention away from the self rather than towards it if one wishes to make peace with the world and one's place in it.

#### WELCOME TO STOICISM

There is no question that the popularity of the Roman Stoics owes much to the ways in which they are read and not only what they have to offer. The general tendency today is to look to the Stoics for comforting lessons on how to withstand the shocks of existence and for advice on how to live. Care for the self as a defining feature of Stoicism is available for those who care deeply about themselves and who find that the world largely cares for them. This is the approach taken by most students of ancient philosophies of the self, including Hadot, Foucault, and their following, all of whom in this respect seem to be in tune with the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. And perhaps an approach to the Stoics along these lines is not all that misguided. After all, the makeup of Stoicism's basic teachings encourages this kind of reading. This makeup includes:

- (i) The reassuringly providential, rational, and purposive nature of the Stoic universe. The world, in its complete physical and rational coherence, fundamentally makes sense. It is not chaotic or threatening once we perceive its true nature—that is, the cosmic sympathy and immanent divinity of all that exists, call it God, Zeus, Nature, Fate, Necessity, the All, or the Whole. The general “mood,” if you like, of Stoicism is easily read off of some of its most basic tenets: for example, the claim that the goal of life—happiness and virtue—consists in “living in harmony with nature” (ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν), or just “living harmoniously” (ὁμολογουμένως ζῆν) (*SVF* 1.552, 179).<sup>2</sup> Inserting Zeus into Nature or just equating him with the natural order personalizes the universe and makes it intimate. The paternal figure of Zeus, monumentalized in Cleanthes’ *Hymn to Zeus* as a divinity who is loving, benevolent, righteous, and a god in whom one can “trust,” would live on in later accounts as it did for Epictetus, who declared that “God [elsewhere, “Zeus”] created all human beings to enjoy happiness, to enjoy peace of mind. He has provided them with the resources to achieve this, . . . as is fitting for one who watches over us and protects us like a true father” (Epict. *Diss.* 3.24.2–3): he leaves none of his progeny orphaned (3.24.15–16). “Serenity, happiness, freedom from constraint,” harmony,<sup>3</sup> a “peaceful life,”<sup>4</sup> feeling “blessed” and “an unceasing cheerfulness (*hilaritas*) and joy (*laetitia*) that is deep and comes from deep within” (this is sometimes called “eupathic joy”), a love of life (*amor uitae*), and being surrounded—almost swaddled—by divine presences (πάντα θεῶν μεστὰ καὶ δαιμόνων) who are also best “friends” (πάντα δὲ φίλων μεστὰ, πρῶτα μὲν θεῶν), are the hallmarks of the Stoic believer, who merely has to look at the world around him, “the sea, moon, and stars, and enjo[y] (ἀπολαύων) the earth and sea,” to know that he “is no more desolate than he is bereft of help” (Epict. *Diss.* 3.13.15–16; 3.20.15; 3.24.11; 3.22.39; Sen. *Dial.* 7.4.4; *Ep.* 26.10). Armed with these assurances, the well-adjusted Stoic will claim that comfort and tranquility trump every difficulty in life: *nihil tam acerbum est in quo non aequus animus solacium inueniat* (Sen. *Dial.* 9.10.4); “haven’t I always presented myself to you with a face shining with joy (φαιδρῶ τῷ προσώπῳ)?” (Epict. *Diss.* 3.5.9).<sup>5</sup>

2. The following abbreviations are used below: *LS* = Long and Sedley 1987; *SVF* = von Arnim’s *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*, cited by volume and fragment number.

3. Epict. fr. 6: “But this above all is the work of nature, to bind together and harmonize (συνδῆσαι καὶ συναρμόσαι) our motives with what we conceive to be fitting and beneficial.” Translations here and below are from the following: Sen. *Ep.*: Fantham 2010; Sen. *Dial.*: Fantham et al. 2014; Sen. *QNat.*: Hine 2010; Epictetus: Hard 2014; M. Aur. *Med.*: Hard 2011.

4. Epict. fr. 10: *uitamque uiuet tranquillissimam*.

5. Genuine (eupathic) joy (χαρά, *gaudium*, etc.) “is directed at genuine goods,” and a Stoic aims at finding a “reason to be joyful at every moment of the day” (Graver 2007: 52–53). Such joy belongs to

- (ii) The suggestion that the Stoic self, subject, individual, person, or agent (leaving open for now the question of this nomenclature and the extent or limits of the synonymy of these terms) is defined by its divine rational core, the soul or *hēgemonikon* (“ruling center”), which is genetically identical to the divine and ruling elements of the universe—intelligent, active (“craftsmanlike” or “designing,” *technikon*), and fiery *pneuma*—whence the *hēgemonikon* was born and to which it returns upon death. Subjects are thus as intelligible as the world they inhabit.
- (iii) The invulnerability of this inner core to external influences and misfortunes: it is a virtual fortress (an *akropolis* or a *munimentum*).
- (iv) The belief in moral perfectionism: that is, the view that the Stoic subject can perfect itself through the practice of mental exercises that serve to train the often imperfectly rational faculties (for instance, in their emotional and desiderative aspects) and bring them into alignment with the directives of the universe, which inclines its subjects to a life lived in accordance with nature and reason. This training of the self by the self is typically understood under the modern rubric of “self-fashioning,” though it was originally formulated in terms of an individual’s becoming virtuous through the exercise of reason and an understanding of nature’s directives.
- (v) The relative autonomy enjoyed by the rational individual, which can exercise considerable freedom to act on the impressions it receives from within (through the mind) or from without (through the senses). Such action lies within its powers and is indefeasibly “up to us” as responsible agents. This is the guarantor of inner stability and eudaimonic happiness, however much hardship we may be obliged to wade through.

So described, the Stoic universe is a hospitable and even cheering place in which to be. Constructed out of living material bodies (the only existents that are), nature is monistic, a cohesive continuum (void having been safely relegated to a place of irrelevance outside the world of substance),<sup>6</sup> and continuously alive. The

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a canon of positive emotions that include “good feelings” (εὐπάθειαι) such as kindness (εὐνοία), generosity (εὐμένεια), warm feelings (ἀσπασμός), affection (ἀγαπήσεις), “well-reasoned elation” (εὐλογος ἔπαρσις) and, “under joy: delight, sociability, cheerfulness” (ὑπὸ δὲ τὴν χαρὰν τέρψιν, εὐφροσύνην, εὐθυμίαν) (D.L. 7.115–16 = SVF 3.431 = LS 65F). It is easy to see how viewing Stoicism through this lens leads contemporary authors to find in the Stoics “individuals who were cheerful and optimistic about life . . . and who were fully capable of enjoying life’s pleasures” and “who valued joy,” despite the customary caveats (Irvine 2009: 7, citing Sen. *Dial.* 9.2.4; cf. 9.2.111, 113); Pigliucci 2017: 210. Cf. Williams 2012: 171: the study of nature offers “a comforting [and “alleviating,” 257] vision of systematization and order”; Long 2019: 99 on Epictetus’ *Encheiridion*: “if you are like me, you will find its abrasive message provocative, invigorating, and even comforting”; Long 2002: 25: “Stoic comforters” (possibly a reference to the *consolator* of, e.g., Sen. *Dial.* 11.5.5). See further n.7 below.

6. “World” and “universe” roughly correspond to *kosmos* and *to holon* or *to pan*. Technically, *kosmos* (the world) is exclusive of the infinite, extracosmic void, while *to pan* (the Whole, the All) is

stability of the universe makes the prospect of taking part in it as one of its constituent members a comforting thought, no matter what the costs of membership are.<sup>7</sup> Whether we are living or dead, the world goes on unproblematically: it continues to live to all eternity.<sup>8</sup> And so do we, both insofar as we are ensouled (for the soul is a bit of eternal *pneuma*) and insofar as the world soul of which we partake (ἡ τοῦ κόσμου ψυχή, *SVF* 2.604) is never extinguished (*SVF* 1.88 = LS 44D; cf. *SVF* 2.526 = LS 44F). Not even the cyclical meltdowns that periodically consume the world with fire—the conflagrations (*ekpurōseis*) that occur at unascertainable but regular intervals in Stoic cosmology—bring an end to what is. On the contrary, the world is never more alive than at such moments: it is all fiery *pneuma*, which is to say comprised of the vital and active force that pulses through all things, ourselves included, and never abandons them, nor does it ever die.<sup>9</sup> The Stoics’ bravura in the face of death is possible only thanks to their belief in the ultimate value of life, which is incarnated in the imperishable cosmos.<sup>10</sup> Whenever the elements resolve back into divine fire and air, as we do upon death, they return to their pristine origins. So decomposed, nature is god in its purest form. And we are ourselves part of this divine substrate. Whence the seamless move in the list

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inclusive of it, a distinction that may have been introduced only late in the history of the Stoa (Mansfeld 1979: 149n.49). In practice, the terms are used interchangeably by all Stoics in much the same way as they are by us. The same is true of the doxography, e.g., *Stob. Ecl.* 1.153.7–22, which probably does not reflect Cleanthes’ original usage; but see *Sen. Ep.* 92.30: *totum hoc*; *M. Aur. Med.* 10.7: τοῦ ὅλου/τοῦ κόσμου. Consequently, I will use “world” and “universe” interchangeably in this essay, except when a technical distinction is required. A question to ask is whether the universe in its totality can be considered a part of Stoic nature. In one sense, the answer is clearly yes, since the removal of extracosmic void—the threat of radical rupture and a sign of utter meaninglessness—from the cosmos is in its own way a reassuring feature of nature’s providential order, hence a “natural” feature of the universe and a source of relief for god and for us. Void is absent from our world by design; it is a norm of nature that it is placed where it is. A similar degree of interchangeability is true of “nature” and other terms mentioned earlier (fate, necessity, god, etc.), each of which picks out a different aspect of Stoic reality, but each of which can be predicated of or equated with the others.

7. Cf. this paraphrase of early Stoic doctrine: “Fate’s plan for you is thoroughly providential. This world is the best possible, and you are in it to perform a very specific role. Recognizing your own apparent setbacks are part of the great design is thus held out as a source of comfort and optimism” (LS 1.392; emphasis added). See n.5 above.

8. The Stoics regarded the world as a living organism (*SVF* 1.111–114; 2.605: *animantem esse mundum*). This is their cosmobiological thesis, which draws its inspiration from Plato’s *Timaeus*. See Hahn 1977, ch. 5.

9. Chrysippus *ap. Plut. Stoic. rep.* 1052c = *SVF* 2.604: οὐ ῥητέον ἀποθνήσκειν τὸν κόσμον; *Plut. Stoic. rep.* 1053b = *SVF* 2.605 = LS 46F: καὶ μὴν ὅταν ἐκπύρωσις γένηται διόλου, <τὸν κόσμον διόλου> ζῆν καὶ ζῶον εἶναι φησὶ [sc., Chrysippus]. The text of LS 46F follows Cherniss. To state that the universe enjoys “its fullest life” during the conflagration (Furley 1999: 439; cf. Mansfeld 1979: 178: “in the best possible condition; surely the best performance Providence can be credited with”) is an overstatement. The world is fully alive at every moment of its life cycle, without differentiation.

10. This is a testament to an underlying Stoic tenet: the love of life is an unbreakable bond. Cf. *Sen. Ep.* 26.10; trans. modified: “There is only one chain that keeps us bound, the love of life (*amor uitae*), and even if this cannot be abandoned (*non est abiciendus*), it can be reduced” when circumstances warrant this. The Epicureans permit only a qualified love of life (see Porter 2003 and Porter 2005).

above from the whole to the part, from the cosmos to the individual, from nature to the self, and from without to within.

So much for the Stoic view of the world, which, seen in this light, is inviting, not repelling. Whence too one of their favorite refrains: life resembles a feast, banquet, or festival. Though vaguely Platonic-sounding and attributed to Pythagoras and Diogenes the Cynic,<sup>11</sup> the conceit may have been coopted by Chrysippus, projected onto a cosmic level, and then made into a hallmark of the school, though it also attracted non-Stoics such as Philo of Alexandria, who offers a compelling version of the analogy:

Those who practice wisdom . . . are excellent contemplators of nature and everything she contains. . . . *They provide their souls with wings, so that they may walk on the ether and contemplate the powers that live there*, as is fitting for true citizens of the world (τὰς δὲ ψυχὰς ὑποπτέρους κατασκευάζοντες, ὅπως αἰθεροβατοῦντες τὰς ἐκεῖ δυνάμεις περιαθρῶσιν, οἷα χρῆ τούτοις τῷ ὄντι κοσμοπολίτας γενομένους) . . . and so, filled with excellence, accustomed to take no notice of ills of the body or of exterior things, . . . such men, rejoicing in their virtues, *make of their whole lives a festival* (ἅπαντά γε τὸν βίον ἑορτὴν ἄγουσιν).

Philo, *On the Special Laws* 2.44–46; emphasis added<sup>12</sup>

If the comparison of life or the cosmos to a spectacle, festival, or banquet is a commonplace in authors from Plutarch to Longinus, so too is the conflation of these motifs, a move that is not difficult to understand. It is easy to slip from the notion of the world as a spectacle to that of the world as a joyous festival. The higher one travels, the more there is on which to feast the mind.<sup>13</sup> Exhilarating and upbeat in tone, these analogies come to be incorporated into what Pierre Hadot calls “spiritual exercises,” which he locates in a number of philosophical schools from Plato onward, though again the Stoics appear to have perfected these in the Roman era. The exercises have an immediate therapeutic value. By taking up in their minds a “view from above”—a sublime cosmic perspective—subjects learn to detach themselves from their terrestrial concerns. Life in the trenches is reduced to a tiny spectacle once it is dwarfed by the cosmic spectacle. Matters of real and utmost value are made apparent simply by virtue of the contrast that an exalted

11. SVF 3.768. Plutarch (*Tranq. an.* 477c) credits Diogenes with the image of daily (not cosmic) life as a festival (ἑορτή). Heraclides of Pontus attributes it to Pythagoras (*Cic. Tusc.* 5.8–9), but this may be apocryphal.

12. Translated as in Hadot 1995: 98.

13. Spectacle: e.g., Plut. *Tranq. an.* 477c-d (citing Diogenes the Cynic); Philo, *Opif.* 54; Epict. *Diss.* 3.24.12; Sen. *QNat.* 1.praef.7–9; Sen. *Dial.* 8.4.2 (*ne tanta eius opera sine teste sint*); *Dial.* 8.5.4; M. Aur. *Med.* 9.30, 32, 12.24. Festival or banquet: Epict. *Diss.* 1.12.21 (ἑορτὴν καὶ πανηγύριον); 2.14.23–28; 3.5.9–10; 4.4.24–27, 45; Epict. *Ench.* 15 (ὡς ἐν συμποσίῳ); Epict. fr. 17. More puritanically, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius regard feasts and banquets as luxuries and hence not worthy analogies for the world, a view that is shared by Epictetus when he is addressing non-metaphorical feasts, banquets, and spectacles. Conflation: [Longinus] 35.2; Epict. *Diss.* 1.1.103–105; 2.14.23–26.

perspective like this generates.<sup>14</sup> But appearances can be deceiving. Not every view from above is exhilarating in the same way, and not every cosmic perspective is a view from above.

Consider Lucretius' famous portrait of Epicurus in book 1 of *On the Nature of Things*. At first sight, we seem to have a model of cosmic rapture that lifts the mind on high. Eager to "burst through (*effringere*) the close-set bolts upon nature" and to discover its truths, "the lively force of his [Epicurus'] mind won its way, and he passed on far beyond the fiery walls of the world, and in mind and spirit traversed the boundless whole (*omne immensum peragrauit mente animoque*)" (Lucr. 1.72–74; trans. Bailey). Though couched as an example of the traditional flight-of-the-mind motif, the Epicurean vision of reality is less a view from above than a dislocated view of what lies in our midst.<sup>15</sup> What Epicurus discovers as he looks beyond phenomenal appearances are the actual constituents of physical reality (atoms and void). The same is true of the preamble to book 3, where Lucretius, addressing Epicurus, compares philosophical enlightenment to the tearing away of a veil from the world: "For as soon as your philosophy . . . begins to proclaim aloud the nature of things, the terrors of the mind fly away, the walls of the world part asunder, I see things moving on through all the void" (3.14–17; trans. modified). Infected with Epicurus' insight and seemingly borne aloft with him, Lucretius views the gods in their true majesty—they are removed from the cares of our world, and indeed from our world altogether (18–24)—and then turns back to the world around him: "Nor is earth (*tellus*) a barrier to prevent all things (*omnia*) being descried (*dispiciantur*) which are carried on underneath through the void below our feet (*sub pedibus*) . . . made so clear and manifest, laid bare to sight on every side (*ex omni parte resecta*)" (25–30; trans. modified). Once again, the spatial coordinates that point up and down are misleading. Meaningless at the objective level of atomic reality (Democr. fr. 361 Luria), they are phenomenal overlays that reflect our habitual subjective perceptions. The glimpse of physical reality makes havoc of our spatial orientations by disorienting us. The revelation that Lucretius is describing is of the *whole* of reality, which is being viewed from all sides (*omnia . . . ex omni parte*), not from above. There is a vertiginousness to all this transparency, though the correct response is in fact a combination of *horror* (shuddering awe) and *uoluptas* (intense pleasure; 3.28–29).

In removing, as it were, the ground out from under our feet, the Epicurean vision shatters our settled perceptions and relieves us of their burden, thanks to the superior knowledge we gain about the true reality of the world—the world, that is, of nature and no longer the world perceived through the familiar lens of culture.

14. Hadot 1995, ch. 9 ("The View from Above"). The motif of the mind's flight through the universe runs through much of early Greek literature and from there feeds into Hellenistic and later philosophy. See Jones 1926.

15. Pace Bloch 1997: 127 ("C'est bien une . . . 'vision d'en haut'"), as if understanding *sub pedibus* literally and construing *dispicere* as *despicere*. But this is a common view. Hadot 1995: 115n.69 gets it right (see next note).



Taking up a view like this—a cosmic view of the universe, after a fashion—has value for that reason alone: it acts as a critique of cultural perceptions. What is exposed at the end of the process, however, is nothing of actual value. Atoms drifting through the void possess and exhibit no real value in and of themselves. They merely deprive our everyday valuations of extraordinary significance. Wealth, ambition, religion, and so on stand revealed as idols of the mind and fetish-like superstitions. Like the rest of what we ordinarily prize (health, bodily pleasures, beauty, longevity, etc.), these are shown up as at best fragile and ephemeral, not lasting, goods. We cling to these things in vain. Letting go, we are released from these objects of desire, which Epicurus describes as being neither natural nor necessary. Tranquility and stable pleasure are the by-product of this release. Liberated from illusions and unchained from fears of vulnerability (the loss of our supposed goods, including the final loss of life itself), we can live freely like gods if we so wish.

#### RIFTS AND ASYMMETRIES

This is not to say, however, that the move from cosmos to individual comes at no cost to the individual. The Epicurean gods live without caring for the world. How can we care for it too? With the world reduced to atoms moving through the void and in this way de-anthropomorphized, ordinary first-person perspectives are radically upended and anything but “trouble-free,” despite the promises of Epicurus and the affirmations of modern scholars.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, Epicurean nature leaves us with nowhere to stand. Lucretius is right to say that envisaging the true nature of physical reality is the source of both *horror* and *uoluptas*. It follows that self-introspection through the lens of atomism likewise brings both *horror* and *uoluptas* to ourselves, for we, too, are compounded of atoms and void. This view of cosmic reality undoubtedly does have a therapeutic and ethical effect, but not one that easily fits into spiritual practices or techniques of the self as these are understood by Hadot, Foucault, and their following. To see one’s self against the backdrop of elemental nature is to rid oneself of common perceptions of the self. (The soul, for one, is now a fragile material entity, while

16. Long 1997: 125: “Epicurus’s objectivity is the foundation of his trouble-free subjectivity.” Hadot ranks the Epicurean way of life as even more relaxed and joyous than its Stoic counterpart: “Stoicism and Epicureanism do seem to correspond to two opposite but inseparable poles of our inner life: tension and relaxation, duty and serenity, moral conscience and the joy of existence” (Hadot 1995: 108). But contrast Hadot (115n.69) on the cosmic glimpse afforded by *DRN* 3.16–31: although it offers, on the one hand, “a grandiose imaginative vision of the formation and dissolution of the universe in the infinity of space, . . . on the other, it throws light on one of the most fundamental feelings of the human experience: *horror* (*l’horror* [i.e., “*le frémissement*,” after Goethe’s *das Schaudern*, or “shuddering”]) in the face of the enigma of nature.” My point here and on the Stoics below is that such contradictions need to be grappled with, not swept under the carpet, as they are part of the substance of these philosophies.

the very medium of perception is itself simulacral.) To avoid this consequence is not to see oneself at all.<sup>17</sup>

The Stoics take a different perspective, at least at first glance. For them, the cosmic view is effective as therapy not by virtue of any sharp contrast with everyday perspectives that it creates but because it is front-loaded with value. Bluntly put, the Stoic view of nature is not subtractive—it does not diminish value by negating it as atomism does. Rather, it is a value-added conception. Whereas the Epicurean subject learns to regard herself as a momentary accident of nature—a product of the chance collision of physical particles (albeit for the most part in obedience to regular patterns; humans are born of humans, fish do not live in trees)—the Stoic subject inherits the full rationality of the natural universe and all that it provides: she learns to regard herself as an integral part of this larger whole in which human nature is not distinct from divine cosmic nature. There is a fullness to this vision of reality that sets it apart from the bleak if eventful landscape of atomism. Every part of the Stoic universe lives in the company of gods and their providential purpose. And because the whole is providentially ordered, so too is every part that belongs to it.

This coherence of the micro- and macrocosmic dimensions of nature was built into Stoic teaching from the time of Zeno's treatise *On the Nature of Humans*, whose motto was that virtue is "living in harmony with nature" (ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν, *SVF* 1.552). Renewing this principle and either fleshing out its implications or redirecting them, Chrysippus in his *On Ends* wrote that virtue is "living in accordance with the experience of what happens in the course of nature ([τὸ] κατ' ἐμπειρίαν τῶν φύσει συμβαινόντων ζῆν), for our natures are parts (μέρη) of the nature of the whole" (*SVF* 3.4). The continuities between individual parts and the cosmic whole are on both views seamless. But this is not owing to any symmetries that obtain between the parts and the whole. The whole takes precedence and the parts follow suit. Chrysippus is emphatic about this last point. Whereas "the universe is a perfect body, . . . the parts of the universe are not perfect, since their existence is not independent but is their particular relation to the whole (τῷ πρὸς τὸ ὅλον πως ἔχειν καὶ μὴ καθ' αὐτὰ εἶναι)" (Plut. *Stoic. rep.* 1054f = *SVF* 2.550; trans. Cherniss). The same asymmetry obtains at the ethical level. Eudaimonic happiness is defined by reference to nature seen as a whole. It is not defined by reference to the flourishing or sufferings of individual members of the cosmic whole. Holism skews this relationship. Thus, "if I knew I was fated to

17. Hadot rarely notices this side of Epicureanism. A single footnote marks an exception (Hadot 1995: 115n.69, quoted in previous note). Though he recognizes the factor of "horror in the face of the enigma of nature," he does not pursue this implication for human self-appraisal, and he instead plumps for the Epicurean goals of "inner peace and freedom" attained through the practice of spiritual "exercises of attention [*prosochē*] to oneself" (83, 269). Foucault skirts the problem. Epicureanism is largely absent from his work because of its extreme emphasis on precarity, which makes for a poor fit with his own view of self-care and self-cultivation. See Gigandet 2012 for this argument. The same is true of Foucault's downplaying of risks that a self must undertake to test its limits (see n.120 below).

become ill, I would wish for it” (so Chrysippus quoted by Epictetus at *Diss.* 2.6.10). “My foot, too, if it had intelligence, would volunteer to get muddy,” Epictetus adds. In neither case is the cosmos affected as a whole.

This asymmetry solves some problems and creates others. It creates a tension that unintelligent parts do not feel and that intelligent parts must learn to navigate around. Unlike our feet, we must volunteer to get muddy (or worse) to follow nature effectively, and we must do so cheerfully and without regret.<sup>18</sup> As Jonathan Cooper writes, “in order to keep the whole [cosmic] thing going, . . . sometimes some of the individuals have to be sacrificed. . . . But the Stoics want us to do more than accept such things as inevitable *losses*—and this is the core of what ‘living in agreement with nature’ means for them. We are not just to accept but to welcome them.”<sup>19</sup> And therein lies the rub. Getting subjects onboard with what is objectively good but subjectively harder to swallow is the point of friction in the otherwise smooth operations of Stoic naturalism and holism. The alignment of nature with the self is anything but intuitively obvious or trouble-free.<sup>20</sup> We are not born with the wisdom that would permit us to grasp the objective truth about nature, and it is not clear that we ever fully learn to embrace it either. Perfection, after all, belongs only to the whole, not to its individual parts, and certainly not to us. (Sages may not be the exception that proves the rule.) Nevertheless, it is only in the light of this deficiency that any steps toward virtue (if not quite perfection) can be taken at all. And that explains much about the potentials and the in-built limitations of Stoic ethics.

It is here that Stoicism and Epicureanism come most closely into contact. The change in perspective that both schools’ theories of nature requires of us is not simply a matter of learning to see the world from above, as “the cosmic viewpoint” is generally understood. The change is a matter of transforming the way the world appears before our own eyes at every moment that we are alive and in every direction that the world opens itself up to. When I see that my own feet are muddy, I am not looking at them from some celestial or Olympian viewpoint, nor does anything change when I accept this fact as natural or inevitable. The “celestial” perspective is a misleading expression. Holism is not the same thing as verticality.<sup>21</sup> The world as a whole has to be thought as a whole. The celestial parts

18. Cf. Epict. fr. 3: “The universe is mighty and superior to us.”

19. Cooper 1995: 595; emphasis his.

20. Klein 2012: 67 briefly notes the “tension” between the subjective and the objective or natural poles of Stoicism, but does not characterize this as a problem that is experienced by a subject. As we shall see, it is.

21. Williams 2012, following Hadot, makes much of the “vertical axis” that accords greater value to the top levels of a hierarchy than to the bottom ones. True, the ancient testimony can support the idea of a celestial hierarchy and a *scala naturae*, which suggests cosmic dualism. Bénatouil 2009: 32 notes that dualism runs counter to Stoic holism and quotes SVF 2.997 = LS 55R (Chrysippus) as one of many textual supports for this view: “no state or process is to the slightest degree other than in accordance with the rationale of Zeus.” The hierarchical distinctions that do run through the Stoa need to be qualified: they are best seen as “blurred, if not erased” by countervailing considerations (36). Sauvé Meyer 2009, esp. 84, underscores the breadth of cosmic interdependence in the Stoa, which runs

of the Stoic world are not superior in value to the lower, terrestrial parts of the world. They do contain more fiery elements than earthly elements, and to that extent they are purer. But the fiery bits of matter that exist in terrestrial things are every bit as fiery and natural as those that exist in the heavenly bodies above. If they were not, the Stoic system would resemble a tyranny and not the commonwealth that it is.

The value of the universe lies not in its altitude but in its constituting a totality through the sympathetic relationship among all its members, which is to say through its holistic embrace and reach. To view the celestial parts of the world in isolation does not shed light on their value, for their value is relational, not intrinsic. In fact, taken by themselves, the heavenly bodies have no discernible independent value, nor does any other individual constituent of the universe when isolated from the whole. Not even ordinary fire enjoys value unto itself, despite its seemingly privileged position at the beginning and end of each cosmic cycle and its close identification with god.<sup>22</sup> Its value, too, is realized only in its relation to the totality of existing things whose existence and cohesion it makes possible, first as their generative source and then as their animating force once it joins with air to produce the vital heat or pneuma that runs through *omnia ex omni parte* (so to speak).

The upshot of these considerations is that *Stoicism urges not an elevated view from above but a synoptic view of the whole.*<sup>23</sup> Whenever we find Stoics invoking the former perspective, they are in fact using it as a metaphor for the latter. It is likely that the notion of “the view from above” is an incoherent concept, for there is no one who can take up this perspective—certainly not Zeus or god, since they are metonyms for this whole, to which they are entirely immanent and not transcendently superior, and certainly not ourselves. The view from above is, on the contrary, a view from nowhere, one that nobody can have.

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horizontally as well as vertically. But to be precise, we would need to recognize that vertical relations run in both directions at once (*viz.*, bottom-up and top-down), and that neither axis, horizontal or vertical, is sufficient to capture the totality of relations that comprise the universe: these are not only omnidirectional but also more complex than can be rendered by spatial relationality (the most obvious example being the part/whole relation).

22. Fire, pneuma, and the divine principle are often conflated in modern scholarship. For caveats about the distinctness of god and celestial or creative fire, see Long 1985: 21–22. The difficulty is that not even the Stoics were unanimous about the distinctions or the cosmogonic and conflagrational processes.

23. “The sage never ceases to have the whole present in his mind” (Hadot 1995: 273). As an example of how humans can emulate the sage’s view, Hadot quotes Sen. *Ep.* 66.6: *toti se inserens mundo*, “plunging oneself into the totality of the world” (276n.32). But Seneca’s posture is not directed at “living in the present [moment]” (pace Hadot 1995: 209–210; contrast *Dial.* 12.11.7: “the mind, . . . liberated . . . and akin to the gods and equal to all the world and all the ages[,] . . . is granted access (*inmittetur*) to the whole of time, past and future”). It is, rather, a way of relating oneself to the whole as one of its parts while at the same dissolving one’s self into the whole. This is closer to what Hadot calls a “universalization” and “exteriorization” of the self (211–12). But even that is not the same as having the whole present in our minds. It is, rather, a form of self-destitution (more on which below).

What about a view of the whole? That is even harder to grasp than a view from above. Imaginative flights may enable us to simulate a view from above, but no such viewpoint seems possible when it comes to imagining the universe in its totality, except, perhaps, for Zeus, although once again Zeus just *is* the whole and its rationality: he does not stand outside it in a spot from which he might view it; he merely embodies the universe by virtue of pervading everything that exists in the form of its rational design (e.g., D.L. 7.139 = SVF 2.300). But perhaps it is ourselves who cannot envisage this for Zeus: our own physical and cognitive limitations prevent us from doing so. We can state the propositions that “the world is a whole,” that “the whole is good,” or that “Zeus thinks the whole,” but we cannot inhabit these speculations from inside: we lack the mental bandwidth.<sup>24</sup>

The elusiveness of such a perspective is a further ingredient that defines the asymmetry between the parts (especially individuals like ourselves) and the universe as a whole. This asymmetry is disquieting to perceive, a point that will become important as we consider aspects of Stoic ethics that do not fit smoothly into the happy embrace of the philosophy, not least because Stoicism is founded on and in principle demands just such a grasp of the totality of the universe—not in scientific detail but by apprehending its overall structure and logic, its rational order—whence the contention that “physics [knowledge of this totality] is a virtue” (Cic. *Fin.* 3.72–73), a principle that is widely shared. Epictetus, the supreme ethicist, knows its value: “God has brought the human race into the world to be a spectator of himself and of his works (αὐτοῦ τε καὶ τῶν ἔργων τῶν αὐτοῦ), and not merely to observe them, but also to interpret them (οὐ μόνον θεατήν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξηγητήν αὐτῶν)” (*Diss.* 1.6.19; cf. Sen. *Ep.* 88.26–28; SVF 3.202).<sup>25</sup> And Seneca’s *Natural Questions* can be explained in no other way: the work has a practical moral purpose that, as we shall see, includes an (often painful) appreciation of human limits.<sup>26</sup>

24. Cooper 2004, esp. 219–25, for an extreme attempt to translate reality in its totality into Zeus’ “thoughts,” or rather his “one huge, single thought” that is materially identical with reality. Again, this *logos* is not a view or even a thought of the whole because it *is* the whole (viz., that which makes the whole a consistent, self-contained, and cohesive whole). Zeus is its metaphor.

25. See Menn 1995, who rightly emphasizes that the science of physics, understood as a virtue, involves both theoretical knowledge and practical experience. It is the latter that most preoccupies the Roman Stoics, who, however, are keenly aware of the limitations of this kind of pursuit. Inwood 2009a notes this difficulty (“That kind of global [i.e., totalizing] perspective on [natural] philosophy is not attainable by *us*,” 207), but then downplays the challenge: “understanding . . . the natural world . . . is rewarding and enables us to live the happy life of which we are capable” (209), and anyway, “any normal human being does just love to do it” (222). A very quick example of how physics can be read in virtue terms and made supremely relevant to ethics is the “justice of nature” described in *QNat.* 6.1.8: “This is one outstanding feature of the justice of nature (*hoc habet inter cetera iustitiae suae natura praecipuum*), that when it comes to death we are all on equal terms.” Another aspect to cosmic justice, according to Chrysippus, is its periodic purging of evil and the restoration of pure goodness (SVF 2.1169–70 = LS 54Q).

26. This assessment accords well with Kerferd 1978, who cites Seneca’s view of what the wise man (the sage) knows. But Seneca’s thinking is not limited to the sage. *Ep.* 88.26–28 is framed by a consideration of *philosophia*, starting with its several branches (natural, moral, logical) in 24–25. It

At the same time, Stoicism makes one further demand that is just as difficult to accept and as alien to our intuitions of ourselves as atomism's insistence that we are but compounds of atoms and void—namely, that in cosmic terms we are little more than parts (μέρη) of a greater whole (we play a bit part, so to speak, in the theater of nature) and that, despite our being wholes unto ourselves as qualified particulars, we are composed in turn of divergent parts, some material (bodily and earthly elements) and some approximating to the divine (breath, fire, and rational mind), though each of these ultimately stems from and is reducible to fire.<sup>27</sup> Our composite natures render us living and breathing embodiments of the asymmetries that run through the rest of the Stoic system. We are riven within.

The pressures that Stoic physics place on our mental and imaginative capacities as we try to conceive of ourselves and the world cannot be underestimated. On the contrary, Stoic ethics, by which I understand not only ethical theory but also practical ethical self-reflection, is *generated* directly out of these conceptual hurdles, which exist not to be overcome but to be encountered, repeatedly and productively. Stoic ethics and the Stoic ethical subject, the individual who is practicing this reflection, are produced at the limits of thought, where self and world come to be experienced, individually and together, *in extremis*. And as we shall see, the picture of Stoicism that emerges from this kind of consideration is not marked by the welcoming reassurances of the school as these are typically portrayed in contemporary treatments, nor is it compatible with the theories of self-care and self-cultivation that are sometimes allied with these reassurances. That the theory of nature grounds the theory of ethics and the self is largely uncontroversial in studies of Stoicism,<sup>28</sup> although the exact character of this grounding deserves to be explored further, not least in view of the challenges that the philosophy throws up for its adherents and that practicing Stoics pose for themselves.

To anticipate in the most general of terms what the rest of this essay will seek to demonstrate through individual examinations of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca, I want to propose a revised version of the orthodox, welcoming view of Stoicism outlined above. The revision will mirror the earlier set of doctrines point-by-point. And because of the three Roman Stoics Seneca provides the fullest exposition of these doctrines across his many voluminous writings, the citations

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then turns to the *sapiens* and ends up by returning to the *philosophus* again in 27 and *philosophia* in 28, the goal of which is *totius mundi naturam . . . comprehendere*. It may be wrong, in other words, to assume that *sapiens* always means “sage” and not “wise/knowledgeable philosopher.” And the same is true of knowledge of nature's comprehensive rationality: that is the purview of every practicing Stoic, as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus all show; it is not limited to the sage. It's just that such knowledge is bound to be incomplete, conjectural, and a theory of what is.

27. See SVF 2.413 = LS 47A; Epict. *Diss.* 2.5.13; M. Aur., *passim*; Sen. *Ep.* 66.12; 102.6. The tension between fire in its absolute purity and in its alterations as elemental fire, air, water, and earth represents a physical and cosmological asymmetry in its own right, one that parallels the other (dynamic) imbalances in the Stoic system and is emblematic of them. See further n.48 below.

28. See Striker 1996 [1991], ch. 12; Cooper 1995; Betegh 2003; Inwood 2009a; Klein 2012. The dissident view (Annas 1993: 135–66) has been mostly laid to rest in the scholarship.

in the next section will be drawn mostly from him, complemented by fragments from the earlier Stoics, while resonances with Epictetus and Marcus will be easy to supply mentally when we turn to their writings later in this essay.

#### REVISING THE STOIC WELCOME

In contrast to the reassuring and welcoming view of Stoicism that was described in the previous section, there are aspects of Stoicism that point in an entirely different direction. These alternative features exist not to deter adherents from pursuing the school's tenets but to incite and challenge them to produce better, hardier, and worthier versions of themselves. These include the following considerations:

- (i) Although the Stoic universe is providential, rational, and purposive in nature, it is not reassuringly so on balance. The world is anything but a calm, tranquil, and orderly place. On the contrary, it is characterized by constant and writhing change, movement, and turmoil, not stability, and by more than occasional irregularity (*QNat.*, passim; *SVF* 1.188 = LS 44D).<sup>29</sup> It passes through cycles of growth and collapse, starting out from a state of absolute purity—primordial fire (*SVF* 1.497) that is so refined as to approach a condition of ἀγλή, sheer gleam or brilliant light (*SVF* 2.611; cf. *Sen. Ep.* 65.19: *aliquid igne lucidius*)—that is neither habitable nor inhabited apart from god. It gradually follows a path of imperfection and impurity, though even this is a simplification. For as Seneca says, “The stages of growth (*incrementa*), if you calculate correctly, are actually losses (*damna*)” (*Dial.* 6.21.7). In other words, the way up is simultaneously the way down. Growth not only entails but actually *is* a state of decay and imperfection, if not corruption, that falls away from this original pure state as it involves increasing amounts of complication and differentiation and consumes increasing amounts of material in the process: “The soul of the cosmos [which is god] . . . continues to grow until it uses up [or “consumes,” καταναλώση] its matter” (*SVF* 2.604;<sup>30</sup> 2.1064); “many disadvantageous things accrued

29. Irregularity is a feature of nature, as is variety (*QNat.* 7.27.1–6). Seneca finds this a source of both terror and beauty. Here, in his more serene mood, he opts for the latter. At times, irregularity merely reflects our ignorance of the larger pattern (*QNat.* 7.25.1–5). But that is not his point in *QNat.* 7.27.1–6.

30. At one level matter is not inherently imperfect, let alone an inferior component of reality; but at another it is less pure than the active principle of the universe (fire). This suggests that competing hierarchies of evaluation run through Stoicism, depending on the perspective taken. Here, the difference lies in the move away from an original purity to an increasing degree of vulnerability in compounded existents. This pattern of “collateral damage” in nature (unintended by-products that occur κατὰ παρακολούθησιν, in Chrysippus’ minimizing, almost apologetic language, *SVF* 2.1170) obtains in both universal and human nature. A case in point is the anatomy of the human head. Its

as inseparable from her [sc., mother nature's] actual products" (SVF 2.1169–70 = LS 54Q). "The brighter a fire blazes, the sooner it goes out" (*Dial.* 6.23.4): this is a law of nature that affects all bodies, including those bodies known as souls, and requires that the world should end in a cosmic meltdown that burns off the corrupted parts (the accumulated matter and its resulting complications) and restores the universe to a condition of pristine and primordial divine fire ("no evil at all remains," SVF 2.606<sup>31</sup>)—a state in which there is no activity (*Ep.* 9.16 = SVF 2.1065), because its actuality just is its pure potentiality.<sup>32</sup> That is the fate, necessity, and nature of the universe to which even god must submit.<sup>33</sup> None of this should be taken to imply that the original state of the world is in any way better than its later evolutions. Quite the contrary: the world is always in its best possible

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utility required subtle material refinement (thin and tiny bone structures) that concomitantly made the head a fragile piece of equipment vulnerable to the slightest of "blows and knocks." (Plato makes the same point in *Tim.* 57b–c.) The same is true of health: making health possible entailed making disease possible. See SVF 2.1169–70 = LS 54Q for both (Chrysippean) examples. But true to form, the Stoics can see patterns of beauty even here. Compare the examples given by Marcus: bread, when it bakes, develops cracks; but the cracks enhance its appeal; "and in olives which are ready to drop, the very fact of their impending decay (αὐτὸ τὸ ἐγγυῶς τῇ σήψει) lends a peculiar beauty to the fruit" (*Med.* 3.2). One has to agree. I don't think that Marcus' remark just reflects a human perspective on a naturally neutral phenomenon. Stoic nature is not neutral: it can't be providentially good and a blank indifferent slate too. However we account for it, the Stoics project the logic of growth as decay or decline back onto nature to arrive at a marvelously complex appreciation of the world in all its manifestations. Turned one way, as in Marcus' example, this comes out as a conception of Stoic beauty, though the conception is anything but naïve or innocent: forged through contrasts, beauty here is tinged with a sense of contingent and inevitable loss. Below we will visit their rather more thrilling conception of the sublime.

31. Long and Sedley (1987: 1:311) comment on this fragment, "the claim that all evil is purged from the universe by the conflagration" entails that "each new world starts out from a condition of perfect wisdom." While the reference has to be to moral evil, the presence of evil in the cosmos, which ordinarily is good or excellent without exception, nonetheless affects the overall purity of the cosmos. This is one of the remarkable tensions that runs through the Stoic system. But it is also inexpugnable from that system, because the problem announces itself right out of the gate: if the cosmos is providential and good by design, then we need to ask, *good for whom, and by whose standards?* And the same holds for evil. Is the Stoic cosmos anthropocentric after all? A related question concerns the changing degrees of benevolence of fire's action during the several stages of the cosmic cycle as it passes from non-creativity to creativity to destructiveness (see Mansfeld 1979: 156). Does fire corrupt itself? Is it a source of evil (183)? Or is fire and the natural cosmos that it represents intrinsically a mixed bag? I lean towards this view. (See below on the ambivalences of the Stoic system.)

32. This explanation is my own best guess. Zeus is not inactive at this time; his activity consists in his thoughts, not in his creativity. Chrysippus held that during the conflagration, Zeus "withdraws into providence" (τὸν Δία τῶν θεῶν ἀναχωρεῖν ἐπὶ τὴν πρόνοιαν, *Plut. Com. not.* 1077d = LS 280), which can be taken to mean that Zeus at this time embodies the sheer intentionality (viz., the potentiality) of cosmic providence, not that "the conflagration *completely instantiates* god's providence" (LS 1:279; emphasis added). See Mansfeld 1999: 469: "Paradoxically, *pronoia* is most prominently present when it is no longer, *and not yet*, engaged in the construction and administration of the universe" (emphasis added).

33. Cf. Mansfeld 1979: 161: "there are serious limitations to god's omnipotence; . . . being corporeal, he is not exempt from the laws of physics." This is borne out by, e.g., *Epict. Diss.* 1.1.8–12, which makes the same point about the limits to god's powers.



state. Neither can we say that the world displays a greater degree of complexity in its later phases than it does in its simplified primordial state: the mere fact that the world in its totality encompasses such wildly different extremes at either end of its cosmological life-span is the most immediate sign of the world's intrinsic complexity and vitality.

Secondly, there are extraordinary gaps in our picture of the world, a fact that enhances its uncertainty for us. Far from being a knowable and certain place, the universe is completely unfathomable, unless it be by god—but assuredly not for mortals, and not even in their most godlike portion, their minds: “So far the truth has eluded us humans. According to the proverb, ‘Certainty is hidden deep’” (*QNat.* 4a *ad fin.*).<sup>34</sup> All that *is* certain is that “the whole of the future is uncertain, and fairly certain to get worse” (*Dial.* 6.23.1). This, too, is dictated by the cyclical movement of nature, which is unalterable. Seneca's worldview can at times appear dire and downright pessimistic: “We can go on accusing the fates, but we cannot alter them: they remain harsh and inexorable.” And the same is true of humankind: “everywhere you find abundant, constant grounds for tears” (*Dial.* 11.4.1–2). Marcus can be just as dark and despairing: “In human life, the time of our existence is a point, our substance a flux, our senses dull, the fabric of our entire body subject to corruption, our soul ever restless, our destiny beyond divining, and our fame precarious. . . . Our life is a war, a brief stay in a foreign land, and our fame thereafter, oblivion” (*Med.* 2.17). The world may be rational in theory, but its workings are anything but rational in appearance (*insanit* and *insanis* are not infrequently used by Seneca to describe nature's phenomena), while the truth of that theory has to be taken on faith, but not through a rational grasp of things—for the truth exceeds our grasp, and recognizing this itself requires a degree of irrationality.<sup>35</sup>

The gaps in our knowledge are both a boon and a curse. They excite us to press beyond our limits. But as they do, they continually expose us to those same limits. We were born to search, not find (*Dial.* 8.5.1–8); to wonder, not necessarily to understand (*QNat.* 7.1.4); and to surge on the edge of insobriety (*usque ad ebrietatem ueniendum*) and madness (*dementia*) (*Dial.* 9.17.8–10). What is more, every experience of a height entails a crashing fall: “Now your minds are lifted up on high, now

34. Said of the Nile, but the same holds *a fortiori* of the universe, which the individual natural phenomena symbolically represent in *QNat.* (This sentence is from the paraphrase in Greek by John the Lydian that is appended to the end of the Latin text.)

35. Sen. *Dial.* 11.9.6; 11.9.9: “we can be certain of nothing”; *QNat.* 7.25.1: we are ignorant about much of what exists. Cf. Graver 2000, e.g., 45, insisting (quite rightly) that inquiry into nature was “driven, all along, by concerns about the limits of our knowledge,” what Inwood (quoted in *ibid.*, 52) nicely calls “epistemic humility.”

dashed down to the depths” (*nunc in sublime adleuatos nunc in infima adlisos*, *Dial.* 7.28.1). By the same token, sublime exaltation is a sign and a product of our belittled status: “We believe [that adverse circumstances but also natural phenomena] are great because we are small; many things derive their greatness not from their intrinsic nature but from our lowly status” (*QNat.* 3.praef.10).

- (ii) The turbulent inconstancy and fluidity of human affairs (*Dial.* 6.22.1) mirrors those of nature (*QNat.*, *passim*), and so too does our death mirror the conflagration (*ekpurōsis*) that restarts the cycle of the universe and its incessant commotion as it runs through its several phases of rebirth (as pure fire), corruption, and purification in rebirth again (*Dial.* 6.26.6–7). “Nothing is ever stable whose nature consists in motion” (*Dial.* 7.7.4). But nature precisely *does* consist in motion (Philo, *Aet. mundi* 52, 54 = LS 52A), in part simply by being unstably composed of contrasting elements (*ex diuersis compositus est*) and in part because two of these, air and fire, are inherently volatile (*in fuga*) (*QNat.* 7.27.3; 7.23.3; cf. 6.18.5; *Dial.* 1.1.2). Nature, too, is a living creature that is affected, or afflicted, with all the circumstances of any living thing: “just like an animal, it will experience equal discomfort all over (*totum uexationem parem sentient*)” the way it does whenever earthquakes strike (*QNat.* 6.14.2). As with the universe, so with each individual living creature, especially ourselves: we begin life in complete purity and innocence; as we mature, we progressively decline, not only towards death but also morally.<sup>36</sup> Thus, “nature’s starting points are unperverted” (ἡ φύσις ἀφορμὰς δίδωσιν ἀδιαστρόφους, *SVF* 3.228); “wickedness soon creeps in” (*cito nequitia subrepat*, Sen. *QNat.* 3.30.8); “perfect virtue escapes and vanishes from our sight, and things that ripen early do not keep till the end of the season” (*Dial.* 6.23.3–4). In both cases, it is the same law of physics that is being obeyed: “whatever reaches its climax is close to its end.”<sup>37</sup> “Nothing is firm” (*nihil stabile*

36. This is not clearly the case for nature. But nature does begin in a state of moral purity and gradually accumulates impurities until purification sets in with the universal conflagration. See *SVF* 2.606 = LS 46 N. *SVF* 2.598 speaks of this process as a “catharsis” of evil. This last fragment may reflect a Christianizing interpretation (so Long and Sedley 1987: 2:276), but the language of being *katharos* does not (e.g., *SVF* 2.642). This kind of thinking illustrates a basic dilemma in the Stoic system, according to which nature is and is not evaluable by moral criteria. Whatever happens in nature is “good”; nothing is evil from a cosmic perspective. Against this, there is the *scala naturae*: some elements are purer than others (for example, earth and water stand at a lower level of purity than air and fire: *SVF* 2.313, 444, 598, 630, 642, etc.); and imperfections do accumulate over time even if from another perspective growth and change can indicate a kind of perfecting of both animate and inanimate things. The underlying problem in Stoicism, perhaps for us more than for the Stoics, is the way the universe is both anthropocentrically intelligible and not.

37. *Dial.* 6.23.3–4. Cf. M. Aur. *Med.* 3.2: “figs, when fully ripe, tend to split open (ὅποτε ὠραιότατά ἐστι, κέχηθεν).” κέχηθεν (“gape open”) is used by Marcus to indicate the abyssal character of time. See below, p. 263.

*est*, *QNat.* 3.27.6) or fixed in place forever (*Dial.* 12.7.10). And for the same reason, subjects are only as intelligible as the world they inhabit.

- (iii) Vulnerability and fragility mark the totality of existence, individual lives and selves included. At the level of the individual person, the Stoic self exists in the tension between its first- and third-personal or impersonal reality: it is part phenomenological “me” and part elemental *daimōn*, and as such it is permanently but also constitutionally vulnerable to expropriation into the impersonal realm of nature.<sup>38</sup> Differently put, we are ineluctably wedded to our material constitutions; we are individuated in this precise sense: this defines our particular coherence.<sup>39</sup> But part of being is being somewhere and therefore being exposed to other things at all levels in both body and soul. Virtuous life is not exempt; it is a trial and a contest. And so too, tied to the vicissitudes of life, the virtuous man (*bonus uir*) “must go up and down (*sursum . . . ac deorsum*), he must be tossed by the waves” (*Dial.* 1.5.9).<sup>40</sup> This is his essential activity; and activity is prone to contingency (*Dial.* 1.5.9) and to much more besides—for “who does not find life a torment?” (*QNat.* 5.18.15). Learning to be mindful of this existential fragility is the first and last step of virtue. “How foolish you are, how forgetful of your fragility!” (*QNat.* 2.59.9), a lesson that applies as much to the sage as to the struggling *proficiens*.
- (iv) For these same reasons, moral perfection is not the final overcoming of obstacles to virtue but a constant confrontation of such obstacles and a permanent testing of one’s self. This requires that subjects train themselves in dangers before they arise: they must seek them out before the dangers seek them out (*Dial.* 1.2.2: *omnia aduersa exercitationes putat*; 9.11.8). Flexibility, “surfing” contingency, avoiding fixed plans, and being responsive to chance and to change are the order of the day (*Dial.* 9.14.1). *Virtue comes from a direct experience of these torments*—this is what it means “to live in accordance with the experience (κατ’ ἐμπειρίαν) of what happens by nature.” Thus, virtue is “illuminated by the very things with which it is attacked” (*Dial.* 7.27.2). To know the hardness of a rock you have to have been

38. By “vulnerability” I do not mean being exposed to harm but rather being exposed to what lies outside oneself, a mutual conditioning by one’s external environment (call it surroundings, others, or nature), hence an interdependency that reminds us that no one and nothing exists autonomously. Cf. Frede 1999. As the present essay develops, I will try to show how the self emerges rather than “is,” owing to these constitutive contexts, but never in an easily discernable, problem-free fashion.

39. *Dial.* 1.5.9: *Non potest artifex mutare materiam. . . . quaedam separari a quibusdam non possunt, cohaerent, indiuidua sunt*. But this creates a “perpetual conflict” between the mind and the body, or between the mind and itself insofar as it too is a body (*Dial.* 6.24.5).

40. The sea is a common metaphor for the disruptions of existence in Seneca, as are the movements of the earth (e.g., *QNat.* 6.21.2: *cum terra quatitur et sursum ac deorsum mouetur*). His substitution of the final flood for the universal conflagration in *QNat.* 3.27.1–30.7 is the culmination of the first symbol; *QNat.* 6 is a meditation on the second; and both recall *DRN* 6.

“dashed on it”; consequently, “I offer myself like a lonely outcrop (*rupes aliqua . . . destituta*) in a shallow sea, which the waves keep lashing” (*Dial.* 7.27.2–3). Conversely, tranquility without the experience of fear, danger, or extremity is naïveté, not virtue. “Good fortune that has known no wound (*inlaesa*) cannot endure a single cut [or “blow”] (*ictum*)” (*Dial.* 1.2.6; cf. *Ep.* 13.2). Not even the sage, who after all is human too, is invulnerable to fear (Epict. fr. 9, to be quoted below) or wounding: his mind will bear the scars of extreme encounters (*cicatrix manet*) “even when the wound (*uulnus*) has healed” (so Zeno, quoted in Sen. *Dial.* 3.16.7 = *SVF* 1.215). Nor is virtue a permanent possession: it must continually prove itself from one moment to the next. “Without an adversary, [an individual’s] manliness (*uirtus*) wastes away” (*Dial.* 1.2.4).

- (v) Being a part of nature (*SVF* 3.4), the individual does not enjoy absolute autonomy of any kind but rather partakes of the whole and cooperates with it. Individual responsibility and agency are of course possible; but these are both delimited by the sphere within which actions that are “up to us” are possible. In the bigger picture, there is much more that is *not* up to us than is. We may call this an ascetic and modest view of agency, which paves the way for an enhanced sense of responsibility, one that is other-directed and not simply egoistic. Our responsibility is to align our natures with the laws and ways of nature, not to act independently of them.<sup>41</sup> Once they are put on a cosmic scale, we recognize how our responsibilities are owed to and shared with other parts of the world, both animate and inanimate, human and nonhuman: they are as large as the world itself. Our agency, by contrast, does *not* follow the same path of enlargement: it shrinks proportionately to our responsibility. The greater our share of responsibility to nature is, the smaller our individual powers of agency can ever be. Such a stance obliges us to recalibrate our place in the world. And because our place in the world is forever changing, so too is the recalibration of ourselves that is required of us. The picture is a dynamic one that keeps us on our toes.

Let us take stock of what has emerged so far. In the place of a single portrayal of the “mood” of Stoic philosophy, we now have two apparently competing portrayals, one welcoming and the other unwelcoming. Assuming that neither

41. Bobzien 1998: 331–38 seems to me to get this right. Epictetus’ view of *ta eph’ hēmin* (“what is up to us”) is “meager”; it is “limited” to intentions (judgment, assent and dissent with regard to impressions within, and impulse); and it does not promise outcomes. Once we add the further factors of the natural “causal interconnectedness of things” and fate, which Epictetus does endorse, the scope of what is up to us—our share of agency—shrinks to an even greater extent. The net result is a modest, circumscribed view of agency that is prudential, pragmatic, and realistic (333). The logic is generalizable to other Roman Stoics. Bobzien does not venture in the direction of enlarged responsibility that I am proposing, however.

portrayal is inaccurate (and there is good evidence to back either view), how can we explain this divergence? I think the answer has to be that Stoicism is open to both kinds of description. If this is right, then we will have to acknowledge that Stoicism is less monolithic and more complex as a philosophy than it is typically understood to be. This is not the same as saying that Stoicism is a label that gets attached to a loose set of teachings or system of precepts that evolves over time, or that Stoicism contains contradictions that it can never abolish, although both of these things are also true; it is rather to say that Stoicism is best characterized as a way of looking at the world that is inherently equivocal: it is a philosophy with two faces.<sup>42</sup> But the two faces can be explained and even reconciled up to a point in the following way.

Whenever Stoicism takes a hard look at the universe, it comes up with mixed results. The world it finds is far from being a quiet place, and the disturbances that run through nature can be disquieting in the extreme. Nature brings injuries and threats into our life, events that it would be false to ignore but wrong to despair of. Without erasing these realities, Stoicism offers a way forward: it asks us to make a mental adjustment and to adapt ourselves to nature. We adapt by looking for a rationale that can be used to explain these predicaments in life and in nature, and we make mental adjustments accordingly—that is, we adjust our picture of nature. Doing so amounts to nothing more than a perspectival shift: nature's doings are not erased. They are accepted, more than they are explained or justified, with the following kind of logic: Whatever happens, happens for a reason, whether we understand it or not. True understanding requires a cosmic perspective that is unavailable to us but to which we can, and must, nevertheless appeal. Nature, Fate, God, or Teleology, are the names we give to this highest-order explanation, or rather inexplicability. Here, the thinking runs from is to ought, not from ought to is: Nature *is*; therefore, if we wish to make our peace with the world of nature, we must live in accordance with it.

The alternative is to state that whatever is, is but for no particular reason, none at least that we should care about. That is the atomistic solution. Stoicism builds

42. It is possible that some of these contrasts were sharpened as different personalities interpreted Stoic doctrine by their own lights. For example, Tony Long (*per email*) suggests that the more optimistic, cheery view reflected in Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* formed a contrast with Chrysippus' earlier acceptance of the inevitable presence of evil in the universe (LS 54Q, cited earlier). Perhaps this is right, though it is also the case that Chrysippus' view embodies this contrast by itself: imperfection (or, if one prefers, vulnerability) accrues as the universe grows but is finally purged periodically; the universe lives on happily ever after. The innovation (if that is what it was) is double-edged, and Chrysippus can be read as both an optimist and a realist (*vel sim.*). My larger point is that most if not all of the major Stoic figures were ambivalent in the same way that Chrysippus is here, and that ambivalence is hard-wired into Stoicism, which recognizes that existents "are tied to one another in polar opposites. . . . Remove one, and you remove the other" (Chrysippus, SVF 2.1169-70 = LS 54Q). In the same way, Cleanthes held that Zeus has "so welded into one all things good and bad that they all share in a single everlasting reason" (LS 54I; *Hymn to Zeus* 20-21). This insight goes beyond a registration of how the world appears to us: it has to do with the way the world is structured as a beneficial ("good") entity, which puts a heavy strain on the notion of opposites. See n.36 above and n.48 below.

into itself a kind of mental ruse that allows us to accept what is given in the world as something that we should honor and not look on with blank indifference. It permits us to take a particular posture towards reality and it encourages an active engagement *with* reality as opposed to a withdrawal from the world. Whence the second component of the Stoic worldview, namely the notion that whatever happens represents the best state of affairs possible at any given moment.<sup>43</sup> This is not exactly a normative claim about nature. It is rather a claim about the *acceptability* of events in nature: they are now irreversible facts that one can begin to reckon with.<sup>44</sup> A view like this has psychological and ethical benefit. It gives us grounds for action, whether mental (adjusting our conceptions of the world) or ethical (locating ourselves in the world). And it creates a sense of urgency about the need for action, a kind of raw motivational requirement of the sort that comes from *oikeiōsis*, even more than any urgency for a particular kind of action.<sup>45</sup> No such urgency can be generated out of the first portrayal of Stoicism above, but it can be generated out of the interplay of both portrayals of the school.<sup>46</sup> Of course, if we succeed in this endeavor, we will have accomplished more than a mental shift. We will have altered our view of ourselves as we stand in relation to nature. And that is of the greatest consequence, for it entails our best possible chances for achieving eudaimonic happiness and the most rational grasp of nature that any mortal creature can hope to attain. In sum, we can say that Stoicism is not merely a theory

43. See Long 1985: 25: “whatever state of affairs obtains at any moment is the best state from the divine perspective,” to which add the crucial qualifications by Bobzien 1998: 32: “there is no innerworldly harmony such that every object [in nature] can realize its individual nature unhindered and unforced”; consequently, she adds, “the world is such that the objects are, as it were, left to battle the conflicts out between themselves. Yet—from the cosmic perspective—[all this] is in accordance with the reason of the world.” I am not sure that it is right to speak of an object’s striving to fulfill its inner nature if striving to do so, regardless of the outcome, just is its inner nature. And I am not sure that the Stoic world is quite as conflictual and antagonistic as Bobzien makes it out to be. Rather, it is infinitely complex and ambivalently constructed. But there *is* turmoil and commotion in the world, while both it and our understanding of it are riven with asymmetries. Accounts that leave either dimension out are guilty of rendering Stoicism a saccharine philosophy that it never was. I prefer “ruse” (so understood) to “trick” in the sense proposed by Mansfeld 1979: 183 (“a sort of trick, which converts evil into good in a purely stipulative way”) and independently by Jonas 2010: 307. Dismissals like these bring us back to the Stoic “welcome.”

44. Or else it is a claim about acceptability that is couched as a normativity. To fall back on the equation of goodness with “order and harmony” (see Striker 1996: 228, on Cicero et al.) is merely to *accept* that what happens in nature *just is its particular order and harmony*.

45. *Oikeiōsis*, after all, disposes us to adapt to our environment in part out of an instinct for self-preservation and in part out of a natural affinity to our surroundings (to universal nature). A crude rendering of the term *oikeiōsis* might be “adapting” to what naturally is by appropriating it and making it one’s own. A metaphorical rendering would be “finding one’s place or home” in the world. The irony of *oikeiōsis* is that any adaptation we make is to what already is our own place in nature; we simply need to learn to acknowledge that this is the case. Hence, a final rendering of *oikeiōsis* would be “making do” with the world.

46. For comparison’s sake, consider how the atomists’ only urgency for action is founded on an indifference to reality. This is a paradoxical stance to hold, and one could therefore claim that atomism urges no particular action at all. Critiques of atomism’s quietism stem from this problem, though they are probably misplaced.

of the world because it is primarily a stance that is taken towards the world, one that requires shifting our perspectives to accommodate ourselves to the world. Cosmological ethics ratifies this mental shift and renders it appropriate, acceptable, and actionable.

Redescribing Stoicism in this comprehensive fashion has the singular advantage that it permits the philosophy to be more robust, and in two ways. First, disharmonies that undeniably occur in nature on a local level (violent episodes of nature, mortality, etc.) or on a cosmic level (decay, *ekpurōsis*) can be absorbed into a more encompassing view of nature without being evacuated of their disturbing features. Such a view of nature is both objective and true even if nature's deepest secrets remain beyond our grasp. At a universal level, the cosmos can be felt to be inherently harmonious because it displays a higher order of necessity, one that reassures us that whatever is the case is for a reason—end of discussion. Second, because Stoic nature is more of a heuristic than a source of certain and exact knowledge (it is not the object of an exact science but is rather the product of a particular stance),<sup>47</sup> we can see how this conception of nature builds into itself a practically-oriented ethical posture that goes beyond the abstract conferral of “goodness” on nature. Getting onboard with the Stoic view of nature as a problem that needs to be addressed, and at every level and moment of our existence, is itself a practical first step in an ongoing process of ethical self-modification. It is “good” for us to do so. The Stoic “good” derives its content from this kind of consideration, just as the perception of cosmic orderliness is just that: a perception that cannot be objectively confirmed but is at most self-confirming.

Put differently, the two portrayals of Stoicism—or better yet, of the Stoic worldview—that were given above are both accurate, but neither is complete without the other, nor are they a perfectly symmetrical pair. The job of an ethical subject is to negotiate a path between these two descriptions of Stoic reality. Stoic ethics is founded on this tension. And the strength of Stoic ethics lies in its refusal to permit this tension to dissolve into any final state of reconciliation. (The first of these descriptions, the Stoic “welcome,” is the product of one such reconciliation.) Stoic ethics is as dynamic as the world of nature that it sets out to encompass, not tame.<sup>48</sup>

47. On the modest requirements of physical knowledge for ethics, see Sen. *Ep.* 88.24–28 with Kerferd 1978, esp. 130–31; Betegh 2003: 292–300. The physics required for Stoic ethics is of course more than simply a stance. It involves a knowledge of the overall structure and teleology of nature (cf. Klein 2012: 86). But every feature of that structure can be translated into the stance of an ethical subject: it is *usable* knowledge.

48. To be sure, a factor may be the tendency of Stoicism to countenance and attempt to render compatible apparently contradictory extremes, as in its embrace of fate and responsibility, self-sufficiency and alterity, the individual and nature, finiteness and infinity, pure and less pure elements (including degrees of purity in one of these: primordial vs. ordinary fire), anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric perspectives, generation and demolition (“you cannot have construction without deconstruction, and conversely, and hence both are equally part of the providential arrangement of things,” Mansfeld 1999: 469), etc. But there is more at stake here than a generous tolerance for extremes. Rather, these create an oscillating dynamic or dialectic through which, and only through

In what follows, I want to trace this redescribed ethical practice in the face of nature's twofold aspects in the writings of Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca, whose challenges to the kindlier and gentler view of Stoicism tend to be downplayed in contemporary treatments of their thought. In order to make the case, it will be necessary to treat each author separately and in their own language, even if this has to come at the cost of occasional repetition. But because my intention is to bring out a strain in their thought that is easily minimized, the repetition will be useful.

#### EPICETETUS: THE OTHER WITHIN

We may begin by returning to the problem of the cosmic perspective as this is staged in Epictetus (50–135 CE), the ex-slave from Hierapolis in Asia Minor who first taught in Rome and later set up a philosophical school in Nicopolis in the Roman province of Epirus on the Greek Adriatic. Like Philo before him, Epictetus invokes the analogy of life as a spectacle. But while the starting point is the same, the analogy quickly takes a different turn. Life, Epictetus writes, is indeed a spectacular feast, and so one should be grateful and deport oneself like a well-behaved guest, arriving on time and leaving when asked once one has enjoyed the spectacle:

And then, when you've received everything from another [i.e., "the sun, the fruits of the earth, the seasons, and the society of human beings and the fellowship that binds them together"—in short, "the experience of what happens in the course of nature"], even your very self (καὶ αὐτὸν σεαυτὸν), will you complain and cast reproaches on the giver if he takes something away from you? Who are you, and for what purpose have you come here? Wasn't it he who brought you here? Wasn't it he who showed you the light? Wasn't it he who gave you companions to work together with you? And senses too? And reason? And as what kind of being did he bring you here? Wasn't it as one who is mortal (οὐχ ὡς θνητόν)? Wasn't it as one who would live on the earth with a small portion of flesh (οὐχ ὡς μετὰ ὀλίγου σαρκιδίου ζήσοντα ἐπὶ γῆς), and would observe his governing order (τὴν διοίκησιν αὐτοῦ), and would accompany him in his procession and take part in his festival for a short period of time (θεασόμενον τὴν διοίκησιν αὐτοῦ καὶ συμπομπεύσοντα αὐτῷ καὶ συνεορτάσοντα πρὸς ὀλίγον)? Aren't you willing, then, after having beheld his pageant and festival for the time that is granted to you (οὐ θέλεις οὖν, ἕως δέδοται σοι, θεασάμενος τὴν πομπὴν καὶ τὴν πανήγυριν) to take your leave when he conducts you away (ὅταν σ' ἐξάγῃ), after having first paid obeisance to him and having thanked him for all that you've heard and seen?

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which, self-reflection and reflection on nature can take place. An early forerunner that would be worth exploring is Empedocles' dialectical account of nature under the aspects of Love and Strife.



His addressee (possibly imaginary) demurs: “No, but I wanted to continue to take part in the festival.” Epictetus insists:

Yes, and the initiates at the Mysteries would like to continue the initiations, and the spectators at Olympia would doubtless like to watch more athletes; but the festival must have its end. Depart, then, as one who is grateful and reverent; make room for others; it is necessary that others, too, should come into the world as you yourself have come, and that once they’ve arrived, they should have room, and somewhere to live, and the necessities of life. But if those who came first don’t make way, what will be left for them? Why are you so insatiable? Why are you never satisfied? Why are you crowding the world (τί στενοχωρεῖς τὸν κόσμον;)?

*Diss.* 4.1.103–106; trans. modified<sup>49</sup>

As a lecture about politesse, this is a rather impolite set of recommendations. The language is hectoring, not welcoming, and this is fully in line with Epictetus’ overall style.<sup>50</sup> This is not the tone of a self-help author—not that Epictetus believed in the value of writing books, whether his own or those by Chrysippus, and above all the self-help variety (1.4.9; 1.4.14; 4.4.2–4; 4.4.15). Neither is it the tone of a caring life-coach assisting his students in caring for themselves. Epictetus generally is a stern and exasperated task master. His discourses, never recorded in writing by himself, are rambling, dialogical, and theatrical, a cross between Socratic cross-examination and Cynic diatribe backstopped with Stoic teaching (cf. 3.21.19; 1.1.23; fr. 10). They must have been stirring to witness. His favorite way of addressing his interlocutors, real or imagined, is by shouting, “Idiot!,” “You slave!,” or “You’re a fool!” (1.4.14; 2.13.18; 2.16.13; *Ench.* 14.1).<sup>51</sup> Often these outbursts can appear like a hyperbolic rendering of the Stoic division of the world into sages and fools (*stulti*),<sup>52</sup> which effectively makes all of its inhabitants idiots. (Sages do not seem to be part of his vocabulary.)<sup>53</sup> Here, however, he sounds like no one so much as Lucretius himself, who impersonates Nature in her reply to an elderly soul nearing death:

Stop sniveling, you dolt! Away with your whinings! You had full use of all the precious things of life before you reached this senile state. But because you continually crave what is not present and scorn what is, your life has slipped away from you incomplete and unenjoyed, until suddenly you have found death standing at your head before you are able to depart from the

49. Cf. *Ench.* 15 for the same exhortations now using the banquet analogy.

50. Most closely at 2.16.37 and 4.15.

51. See Arrian’s own assessment of the work in his preface: Epictetus’ utterances were lively and emotive, conceived and delivered “on the spur of the moment” (αὐτόθεν ὀρμηθεῖς, 3) and designed to impact the listener experientially (πάσχειν/πάθειν, 8) and not simply through a rational registering of Stoic doctrine.

52. *SVF* 1.216, etc.

53. Sages typically appear only to be dismissed. See further Long 2002: 33 and 37.

feast of life filled to repletion. Quick then, discard all behavior unsuited to your age and with equanimity yield to your years; for yield you must.

3.952–60; trans. Smith

As I suggested earlier, the atomists offer a less flattering portrait of the human creature than the Stoics generally do. Here, Epictetus gives us a hint as to why we may need to revise this picture. How can we square Epictetus' stances with the Stoic view that the cosmos is a welcoming and cheering place? The last-quoted question from book 4 above (τί στενοχωρεῖς τὸν κόσμον;) has to be understood in its most literal sense—not just “Why are you crowding the world?” but “Why are you taking up so much place in the *kosmos*?” The remark is jarring. The cosmos may be limited, but surely there's room enough in it to accommodate a few more human lives. Evidently not, according to Epictetus. Is he drifting away from the tenor of the school?

Epictetus can be faulted for any number of things, but he is not a renegade Stoic. He knows the party line and he toes it too. The question of how the cosmos makes room for previously existing bodies and souls did exercise the Stoics, including Marcus Aurelius, who asks, “If souls [and bodies] continue to exist, how does the air have room for them from all eternity?” (πῶς αὐτὰς ἐξ αἰδίου χωρεῖ ὁ ἀήρ, 4.21). The answer he gives is that they dissolve into their natural elements, which are then cleansed in the course of the cosmic cycle (4.1 and *passim*). Epictetus seems to be asking about the same problem; but his solution, reflective of his general philosophical style, is not physical but ethical<sup>54</sup>—which is not to say that Epictetus' ethical solution does not presuppose canonical Stoic thinking about physics. It most certainly does. He recognizes the elemental principles of nature (σπέρματα, 1.9.4, to be quoted below) and he knows about the cosmic cycle (2.1.18; 4.1.100). His view of nature, leaving cosmology and other technical areas of physics aside, is perfectly Stoic as well, as is shown for example in book 1: “God has brought the human race into the world to be a spectator of himself and of his works, and not merely to observe them, but also to interpret them” (1.6.19). To this beautifully expressed thought Epictetus adds the reminder that by observing the world we learn to live “a way of life that is in harmony with nature” (σύμφωνον διεξαγωγήν τῇ φύσει, 1.6.21). This is doctrinaire Stoicism. And he closes the thought with a more pointed utterance: “Take care, then, that you don't die without having contemplated these realities” (ὁρᾶτε οὖν, μὴ ἀθέατοι τούτων ἀποθάνητε, 1.6.22). There's a stern chill to this last remark, which is more of an ultimatum than an invitation, and, once again, true to form for Epictetus.

In the pages that follow, I will try to show that with his somewhat demanding view of nature and our place in it, coupled with his diffidence about plumbing nature's deepest secrets, Epictetus was in no way out of line with his Roman Stoic

54. See fr. 1 for his agnosticism about technical physical matters, and elsewhere, including fr. 10, disdaining such pursuits.

peers. The coordination of self and nature is not in question for him, because how we fit into the largest scheme of things determines our ethical attitudes. What is in question is the matter of the fit. Here, we can and should approach Epictetus' philosophy from both sides of the equation. He is often cited as a philosopher who praises the capacity of a subject to enjoy complete moral agency and to act rationally on its choices. This is partly true, but it is not the whole story: or rather, not the best way of framing the problem of autonomy. I want to suggest that Epictetus' teaching is *a philosophy of limits, not of possibilities*. We act freely only within tightly defined constraints, and these are more circumscribed than one usually imagines. We may be the masters of our judgments, but we do not master the objects given to us from without (externally) for judgment (τοῦ δόξαι δὲ ἢ μὴ δόξαι, ἡμεῖς κύριοι καὶ οὐ τὰ ἐκτός, 1.11.37). At issue are not only so-called externals (the "indifferents" that are neither here nor there when it comes to virtue, except insofar as we treat them as morally indifferent), but also our very existence, which is in significant ways an external mini-good or preferred good (1.2.12; τὸ ζῆν ἀδιάφορον, 2.6.2). The fact of our existence is nothing over which we exert control: it is a matter of pure contingency. Epictetus is emphatic on this point. Our life is a gift and an accident of nature, and in neither case is it ours to choose (ἔδωκεν, 1.17.25; <οὐκ> ἐδίδοτό σοι προελθόντι ἐκλέξασθαι, 1.12.28) or a possession we can call our own: you cannot lose what you do not possess (1.18.16); our life is on loan from nature. In the last analysis, whatever is most precious in us, for instance our *hēgemonikon* (ruling center), is strictly speaking not ourselves but god, for we are but a fragment of god, one "that he has detached from himself" and given to us (τὸ ἴδιον μέρος, ὃ ἡμῖν ἔδωκεν ἀποσπάσας ὁ θεός, 1.17.27) to use in order to test and judge the relative worth of our lives (2.23.6).

Epictetus' language is curious but significant. It points us to our self and then away from it again once it locates god within us: "You are a fragment of god; you have in yourself some bit of him" (σὺ ἀπόσπασμα εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ· ἔχεις τι ἐν σεαυτῷ μέρος ἐκείνου, 2.8.11; trans. modified). God stands in a peculiar relation to us. Sometimes he is "within" us, our very own *daimōn*, and so equivalent to our best internal capacities (1.14.14; 2.16.33). Sometimes he is external to us, as if monitoring us from without (he observes all our thoughts, 2.14.11), or else acting as the source of our volition (if he wills something, so do we, 4.1.89). Sometimes he is equivalent to who we are (when we feed or exercise ourselves, it is god whom we feed and exercise, 2.8.12). Plainly, the lines between what is interior and exterior to us fade to the point of indistinguishability. And as they do, our grip on a particular identity slips away.

If god is who we are, then we are little more than this provisional identification with god in a small segment of the space-time continuum. Properly speaking, we are him. More properly speaking, he is who we momentarily and imperfectly are. This is the ultimate constraint on our volition, freedom, and autonomy. It is not and never will be "up to us" to stand in this relation to god. It is up to god, who has no constraints at all apart from those imposed by the intrinsic limits of matter

(1.1.10–12).<sup>55</sup> It may be that *qua* rational agents we are qualitatively the equivalent of god (1.12.14), but to attain this equality we also have to acknowledge the opposite, namely that we are inferior to the universe, which, “mighty and superior (ἰσχυρός ἐστὶ καὶ κρείσσων) to us,” has providentially embraced us as we could not do for ourselves (fr. 3).<sup>56</sup> For the same reason, it is impossible to locate our self in itself, as an isolated entity, because our self is never alone. “Remember never to say that you’re on your own” (ὄτι μόνοι ἐστέ, 1.14.13), for a self is never “itself” but is always inhabited by and the property of another (or Other).

Epictetus’ language of the self is not groaning under the strain of these complexities. It is our language of the self that is. We should not speak of the *hēgemonikon* as the self, for it is not in a self’s possession. But neither is the *hēgemonikon* extensively equivalent to god, nature, or the whole. It, too, stands in a partitive relation to the whole.<sup>57</sup> The problem lies in Epictetus’ signature notion of what is “up to us” (*eph’ hēmin*), which designates our capacity for moral agency and responsibility, but which clashes uncomfortably with the intuitive and ordinary grammar of the self, which is biased towards a naturalized first-personal perspective (as in “I must die,” 1.1.22). The “us” in the “what is up to us” formula is not ourselves but our *daimōn*, who is of god. Our job, in that case, is to get out of the way of our *daimōn* and to free it back to the universe whence it comes.<sup>58</sup> We

55. See Long 2002: 160–62.

56. This statement appears to be contradicted by *Diss.* 1.12.26, according to which we are smaller than the whole *qua* body but equal to god *qua* rational spirit. But at 4.7.6–7 we are told that reason itself teaches us how god “made all the parts [of the universe] to serve the needs of the whole” and to “yield” (εἶκεν) to it. The relation is one of strict obedience and virtual instrumentality.

57. This must be true even if we equate the *hēgemonikon* with cosmic reason. Cf. Klein 2016: 185: “Though the *hēgemonikon* is the faculty by which an animal governs its own motions, it is also the faculty by which cosmic reason governs it.” We still have the problem that the faculty in us is not materially coextensive with cosmic reason; it is merely one of its points of application. Removing our *hēgemonikon* from the picture does not remove cosmic reason from the universe.

58. For an example of the unavoidable pronominal confusions, see Long 2002: 220: “The crucial claim, then, is that nothing outside our *individual selves* has ultimate authority over what *we* want or do not want. Epictetus presents this capacity as the basic fact about *the self*. It is a claim concerning *our* power as agents, but as agents of *our minds*’ behaviour rather than of what *we* can do to bring about changes in the external world” (emphasis added). But it is Epictetus who introduces these confusions, not least with the *eph’ hēmin* concept. (Similarly, Marcus Aurelius, e.g., *Med.* 5.10: “No one can force me to disobey its [sc., his *hēgemonikon*’s] will.”) A question to ask is why the faculty of assent (or the ruling center) can intermittently fail, all other things being equal, and why it needs to be trained and perfected if it comes to us in a pristine and divine form (cf. 3.22.19: “You must begin, then, by purifying your own ruling center,” πρῶτον οὖν τὸ ἡγεμονικόν σε δεῖ τὸ σαυτοῦ καθαρὸν ποιῆσαι). The Stoic doctrine, mentioned above, that nature accrues imperfections may be a factor but this still leaves questions. For example, who is doing the perfecting? Are we training it or is it training us? And why does *that* fail or succeed in turn (cf. 1.8.4–5)? It may be that we are simply learning to get out of the way of this faculty—which still leaves it unclear who the subject “we” is above. An additional problem is that the volitional agencies become multiplied: “It is up to individual persons to make their own *daimōn* accord with God” (Long 2002: 164). But the *daimōn* just *is* our *hēgemonikon*. How can I govern the governing part that is supposed to be in charge of this very activity? And what governs *this* “I”? A regress looms as long as we insist on an intuitive use of first-person pronouns.

may think of this kind of self-removal as a self-destitution: it abrogates our claims to self-sovereignty.

It is here that we can begin to see why the rifts and asymmetries that are palpable in the relation between the Stoic self and cosmos can open up a different sense of what it is to be a self, and why talk about Stoic “selves” and “selfhood” may be flawed. Nor does the resort to a citadel or fortress within (*akropolis*, 4.1.86) give us the answer. It is not the case that the significant elements of who we are, our innermost selves, give us a protected status of invulnerability while our temporary housings, the body and its appurtenances, are vulnerable. As with Epictetus so with others: the very integrity of our identities is permanently at risk, and it is this by definition. Simply by virtue of its partitive nature, the self (call it our essential identity, our *hēgemonikon*, our rational core, or divine spark) is fragmentary, incomplete, and unlocatable because unlocalizable. Its allegiances are to the whole that is nature, not to anything else, and certainly not to “us” (whatever that is). Its propensity is to join in the collective whole of which it is a part and to which it (and we) truly belong. The energy of the Stoic universe is dispersive. The parts are eccentric to themselves.

The freedom of an individual comes not from its ability to act on its own but rather from its liberation from the narrow, particularistic perspective through which it intuitively views events in the world and the world itself and from its discovery of a capacity to view things from a synoptic perspective and in the round (Epictetus calls this a *δύναμις συνορατική*, 1.6.1; Lucretius spoke of seeing reality *ex omni parte*).<sup>59</sup> With this perspective comes freedom from disturbance and genuine happiness. But to achieve this perspective requires a mighty effort of disinvestment in the particularities of one’s existence and a virtual surrender to the otherness of the whole—one must become a true “citizen of the cosmos” (*κόσμιος*, 1.9.2; *πολίτης τοῦ κόσμου*, 2.10.3) by subordinating one’s will and rationality to the whole: “One who has achieved virtue and excellence, after having examined all these questions, submits his will to the one who governs the universe (*τὴν αὐτοῦ γνώμην ὑποτέταχεν τῷ διοικοῦντι τὰ ὅλα*) just as good citizens submit to the law of their city” (1.12.7; cf. 3.26.18: *πειθεσθαι τῇ διοικήσει τῶν ὅλων*).

The challenges to ordinary self-identity that this affiliation brings with it are immense. To take up the view of the whole effectively entails that we become

59. Cf. Longinus 35.3, expressing the view that the whole of the cosmos (*ὁ σύμπας κόσμος*) is at times too confining for the mind, which must exceed these boundaries. How does this occur? By looking all around [lit., “in a circle”] at *life* (*περιβλέψαιτο ἐν κύκλῳ τὸν βίον*) and contemplating “the extraordinary, the grandeur, and the beauty that dominate in *all things*” (*καὶ εἴ τις περιβλέψαιτο ἐν κύκλῳ τὸν βίον, ὅσῳ πλέον ἔχει τὸ περιττὸν ἐν πᾶσι καὶ μέγα καὶ καλόν*). The gloss contradicts the premise, or else redefines it: what appears as a transgressive view from above and beyond is rendered into a totalizing, holistic view that includes meteorological phenomena in our midst as well as the light of the stars above. Longinus’ moves are fully in line with the Stoic understanding of nature, at least in this instance. We should note too that the phrase *ὁ σύμπας κόσμος* is drawn straight out of the philosophical lexicon. It appears in Democritus, in Aristotle, in Aristocles reporting Zeno and other Stoics (*SVF* 1.98), in the doxography to Chrysippus, in Philo (*SVF* 3.336), and in Marcus Aurelius (12.23).

a third-personal entity in relation to our first-personal selves. The “I” must learn to see itself as an “it.” More rigorously, there are no “I”s and no “its” in the cosmos, no first- or third-persons. There is only an impersonal—from our perspective, depersonalized—realm of relations and events. The only way to achieve this grasp of who and what we truly are and, equally, who and what we are *not*, is through the study of nature:

Now, suppose that one has paid close heed to the organization of the universe (τῆ διοικήσει τοῦ κόσμου παρηκολουθηκῶς), and has come to understand that, of all things, the greatest, and most important, and most all-embracing, is this society in which human beings and God are associated together [more literally, “this compounded and organized whole made up of human beings and god,” τὸ σύστημα τὸ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεοῦ]. From this are derived the generative forces (τὰ σπέρματα) to which not only my father and grandfather owe their origin, but also all beings that are born and grow on the earth, and especially rational beings, since they alone are fitted by nature to enter into communion with the divine, being bound to God through reason. Why shouldn’t one who understands this call himself a citizen of the universe (κόσμιον)? Why not son of god?

1.9.4–6; trans. slightly modified<sup>60</sup>

Much of Stoic thought is focused on the difficult labor of achieving this view of things. All of its goals—improvement, perfectionism, living virtuously—culminate in this ultimate grasp of the universe from a radically alienated position. And because of the sheer difficulty of this grasp of nature, which can be achieved in outline and in theory but never completely—only Zeus or god enjoys that privilege, or else nature in its intrinsic rationality, which we might say displays an implicit or immanent knowledge of its own totality—Stoic philosophers have a keen sense not simply of the difficulties involved in this task but also of its perils. For to divest oneself of the first-personal perspective is to stand on the edge of an incomprehensible new world. It is to live on the edge.

#### MARCUS AURELIUS: THE UNBOUNDED SELF

Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*, as they are now called, date from the late second century CE. (Marcus lived from 121 to 180 CE.) That they are informed by Epictetus’ *Discourses* is well established. Marcus acknowledges the fact himself; he quotes Epictetus on occasion; and he names him in the same breath as Socrates

60. ὁ τοίνυν τῆ διοικήσει τοῦ κόσμου παρηκολουθηκῶς καὶ μεμαθηκῶς, ὅτι ‘τὸ μέγιστον καὶ κυριώτατον καὶ περιεκτικώτατον πάντων τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ σύστημα τὸ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων καὶ θεοῦ, ἀπ’ ἐκείνου δὲ τὰ σπέρματα καταπέπτωκεν οὐκ εἰς τὸν πατέρα τὸν ἐμὸν μόνον οὐδ’ εἰς τὸν πάππον, ἀλλ’ εἰς ἅπαντα μὲν τὰ ἐπὶ γῆς γεννώμενά τε καὶ φυόμενα, προηγουμένως δ’ εἰς τὰ λογικά, ὅτι κοινωνεῖν μόνον ταῦτα πέφυκεν τῷ θεῷ τῆς συναναστροφῆς κατὰ τὸν λόγον ἐπι<πε>πλεγμένα’, διὰ τί μὴ εἴπη [τις] αὐτὸν κόσμιον; διὰ τί μὴ υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ;

and Chrysippus—good company indeed (1.7; 4.41; 7.19). His Stoic credentials have been doubted (he never identifies himself as one), but strong defenses exist.<sup>61</sup> For present purposes, he is fully representative of Stoicism in its Roman phase.

Book 1 opens with a tribute to the various sources of moral and ethical inspiration in Marcus' life, starting with his ancestors and parents (the first three words set the tone: Παρὰ τοῦ πάππου, "From my grandfather"), then several teachers and instructors or philosophers (Epictetus is prominent among them and he may even be an inspiration<sup>62</sup>), and culminating with the gods, who serve to ratify the foregoing list of debts in Marcus' moral education. The list, appearing where it does, impresses on the reader a particular feature of Marcus' stance towards himself that is borne out in the rest of his essay: it is remarkably *other-directed*. This, too, is an Epictetian inheritance.

The self to whom Marcus addresses his work (its title comes down to us as Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτὸν, "To Himself") is substantially indebted to others.<sup>63</sup> As Richard Rutherford writes, "There is quite simply nothing else like Book I of the *Meditations* in the whole of classical literature. Even its links with the rest of the work have never been very satisfactorily established."<sup>64</sup> Perhaps this is so only because scholars have been looking too ardently for the proprietary self of Marcus in this work. As Marcus fleshes out his *Meditations* it becomes clear that when he speaks about himself he is not limiting what he says either to himself or to his self. On the contrary, in Marcus' eyes the self enjoys only a relative autonomy in the world; its nature is fundamentally involved in the nature of others and of the universe. Care of the self, on this view, is a care for others. In interpersonal terms, care of the self translates into a belief in the fundamental sociability of the self. In physical and metaphysical terms, it translates into a version of the Stoic doctrine of sympathy, according to which everything in nature is connected with everything else, and indeed, not merely connected but interpenetrating, dispersed, and forever reassembling into new configurations of parts and wholes (4.27; 2.3–4).<sup>65</sup>

To speak of selves, then, is to speak of momentarily circumscribed entities that have a tenuous grasp on identity. Selves are not self-authoring or authorizing, nor are they individuals, that is, indivisible entities who are defined atomistically in contrast to other individual selves or objects, even if they do have a sense (one could say, illusion) of their being autonomous subjects. Each soul is a speck of the universal soul, a mere fraction of that larger entity, which alone has a claim to identity (4.40; 5.24; 12.30).<sup>66</sup> This is the source of its real debts. (The kinds of debt

61. For one such defense, see Gill 2012.

62. For the appeal to one's forebears (an other-directed acknowledgment), see also Epict. *Diss.* 1.9.4 on the cosmic generative forces (τὰ σπέρματα) that impinged on "my father and grandfather" and all other beings on earth; and 2.10.7–8: "Remember next that you are a son . . . [and] also a brother."

63. On the title, see Rutherford 1989: 9 and 13; Gill 2013: xv.

64. Rutherford 1989: 48.

65. On Stoic sympathy, see Rosenmeyer 1989 and Holmes 2019.

66. *Med.* 12.5: "There is one soul, even though it is divided amongst countless natures, each with its own limitations (ἰδίαις περιγραφαῖς) [these are equivalent to provisional, soft "boundaries" or

that are on display in Book 1 are a first-personal, self-to-other version of these larger, cosmic connections.) Souls are transient things: they come and go, they enter into individual bodies and then “are diffused, and are burned up when they are taken back into the generative principle of the universe,” ceding a place to the souls to come (4.21). On Marcus’ view, which is Heraclitean in its embracement of wild and even terrifying flux and change, our souls have no abiding features (once we perish, our souls are no longer identifiably “ours”). They are constantly undergoing restless change even as we are alive (“our soul is ever restless”; more literally, it is a “whirligig” [ρόμβος], 2.17). And the features they do have can appear to be fragile in the extreme: in one of his more depressive moods, Marcus says that the soul is a locus of “mere dream and delusion” (2.17).<sup>67</sup> Following a suggestion by David Sedley, we might label the self that we find in Marcus’ theory a “fluid self.” This self takes its features from the context of cosmology and is distinct from the “lifelong enduring self, ‘the peculiarly qualified individual’” (the ἴδιος ποῖος, 9.25; 6.3) that we intuitively take ourselves to be.<sup>68</sup> Accordingly, the fluid self is the only self that “really counts.”<sup>69</sup>

While it is attractive, this account is hard to square with Marcus’ insistence that the peculiarly qualified individual and the fluid self are identical entities. In addition, it credits the notion of the self with too much authority. Marcus explodes the idea of the self at both ends of the spectrum by locating the self within a system of relations and debts to others (its identity is *relational*, and it can even be said to be an *effect* of these relations) and by redescribing it as a cosmic entity. Both redescriptions of the self outstrip the very vocabulary of selfhood, as they did in Epictetus earlier. If in our social relations we are constituted in relation to otherness,<sup>70</sup> in our cosmic identity we are expropriated by the cosmos. And this condition of cosmic belonging does not occur only in the long run, after we dissolve into our elemental constituents. It takes place in the short run too, for we are *already* an arrangement of those constituents, however much we may resist the fact.<sup>71</sup> This is what it means to be a citizen of the universe (12.36). So much for the

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“outlines”]. There is one intelligent soul, though it may appear to be divided, [that gives rise to] the feeling of common fellowship (τὸ κοινωνικὸν πάθος).”

67. Marcus draws no firm distinction between soul and mind or the *hēgemonikon*, and sometimes breath (as in 10.7: τὸ πνευματικόν), which makes his frankness about the afflictions of the soul appear to verge on heterodoxy. But cf. Sextus *Adv. math.* 7.234 = LS 53F.

68. Sedley 2012: 401.

69. Sedley 2012: 401.

70. The preface to Marcus’ *Meditations* would be annulled if we assumed that one’s peculiarly qualified individuality is defined by “the person bearing your name who came into the world when your mother gave birth” (Sedley 2012: 401). The rhetorical effect of the preface is to ramify the self’s debts to others, not to particularize it. And it does so by putting the self in relation to a *koinōnikon telos* (9.23). The “social” self does not preexist these relations; it is *hailed into existence* by them, as is the individual (provisionally circumscribed) self: it is their offspring and product.

71. My comments are meant to revise two statements by Sedley. “For Marcus, in the long run *you are your ingredients*, and everything else is likewise identical with its material constituents” (Sedley 2012: 399; emphasis added). “For that [fluid] self is, *sub specie aeternitatis*, both who we truly are, and



physics, which is the *sine qua non* of Marcus' Stoicism, whose motto runs, "If you don't know the universe as a whole (ὄτι ἔστι κόσμος), you don't know who you are" (8.52). Our *ethical* burden is to realize these truths in this life by living in agreement with nature in the here and now of our human coordinates, by facing outward and not inward (4.3; 9.22).<sup>72</sup>

Lavishing attention on one's self is, accordingly, a futile exercise, and to this extent Foucault's picture of someone caught up in a problematization of the self, anxiously taking his pulse, quantifying his pleasure quotients, tallying up what appear to be "frankly . . . unimportant details,"<sup>73</sup> and measuring his biorhythms in order to gauge the sexual act,<sup>74</sup> seems a far cry from what Marcus is presupposing and recommending. Bodily regimens are utterly minimized in the *Meditations*, as are institutional relationships such as marriage, law, religion, and so on. From his father Marcus learned how little (how moderately) one should care for one's body. Outward appearances are valueless. "He [sc., Marcus' father] attached little importance to his food, or to the fabric and colour of his garments, or to the attractiveness of his slaves." "He rarely had need of a doctor's help, or medicines, or external treatment," and so on (1.16). He was a very bad Foucauldian, in other words.<sup>75</sup> For the same reasons, Marcus makes for a rather disobedient subject when he is measured against other, more recent accounts of his philosophy.<sup>76</sup>

In fact, the body for Marcus is nothing but a temporary housing for the *equally* temporary soul, whose destiny is not to rise up, Platonically, to a higher level of

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the aspect of us that will, thanks to elemental redistribution, be most successful in unifying itself with the cosmos" (401). The point is that we are already now our ingredients (not later), and we are already successfully unified with the cosmos (even if we don't know it or appreciate it). This physical relation is true of everything that exists.

72. *Med.* 4.3 is an interesting example. Marcus exhorts his reader "to retreat into this little plot of earth that is truly your own." This is not a recommendation for interiority: Marcus does not mean that we should retreat from the human world. Rather, he encourages the reader to engage fully with the world "as a man, a human being, a citizen, a mortal creature." And the recommendation is bracketed by reflections on the cosmos that gives each of these four nouns their substance.

73. Foucault 2014: 101.

74. Foucault 1986: 126.

75. Or else Foucault is not entirely consistent. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* Foucault briefly indicates that Marcus' conception of the self "tends towards a dissolution of individuality" (Foucault 2005: 307). Here, Marcus' physics points Foucault in the right direction.

76. E.g., Long 2012: 472: Marcus' work "highlights the self as an autonomous subject of consciousness, a fixed internal point of refuge in an outer context of flux and confusion." Elsewhere, though, Long acknowledges another side to this picture, an "externalist and deflationary" sense of self (476). Which view is right? I will be attempting a reconciliation in what follows, in part by aligning both with a third view, according to which the self does not legislate its own actions; nature does, and nature is both internal and external to "us," as seen in a passage like 5.27, where "we" are said to be obedient to the bit of divinity that resides within us. See below, p. 260, on the "extimacy"—the intimate exteriority—of the Stoic self, and above, pp. 250–52, on Epictetus. Once again, Stoic physics is typically understood as a way of buttressing, solidifying, and fortifying the self, not of challenging its limits, as in Hadot 1992: 130: "Et si la physique stoïcienne, nous aurons à le redire, fait apparaître les événements comme tissés inexorablement par le Destin, *le moi prend conscience de lui-même comme d'un îlot de liberté au sein de l'immense nécessité*. Cette prise de conscience consistera à délimiter *notre vrai moi* par opposition à ce que nous croyions être notre moi" (emphasis added).

existence (to become a purer form of soul), but rather to re-enter into the cycle of existence, to change its texture and to become another element of the world and to be permanently and continually othered in an ongoing and joyous reassemblage amidst all that is, the totality of which just is this process of reassemblage: “You entered the world as a part, and you will vanish back into that which brought you to birth; or rather, you will be received back into its generative reason through a process of change” (4.14).

If one were to speak of care of the self here, one would have to speak of the universe’s own care for *its* self: it is the universe that is a single living creature (a *zōion*) endowed with a single soul and with its own singular perception, driven by its own single impulse, and demonstrating “how intricate and densely woven is the fabric formed by their [sc., all things’] interweaving” (4.40). Perhaps such a being *does* care for itself. If so, it does not do so in the way that current views of self-care envision.<sup>77</sup> And the same holds for the care that individual souls are asked to provide themselves in the *Meditations*. Individuals demonstrate a care for themselves insofar as they strive to approximate to the reality of this one being. And to do so, they must embrace themselves as transient and momentary figments of this universal entity.

That task, I take it, has at least two aspects. The first is to come to terms with radical finitude and to learn to disregard the habits of the body and the vicissitudes of life in the way that Marcus’ father taught him to do. In the extreme, it is to face up squarely to the death that one’s life contains: “Put away your books, distract yourself with them no longer, that is not permissible; but rather, as though you were now on the verge of death, despise the flesh—just blood and bones and a mesh of interwoven nerves, veins, and arteries” (2.2); act “as if you had already died and your life had extended only to this present moment” (7.56; trans. slightly modified). Cultivation of the body is not the way to a higher sanctity of any kind, although divesting oneself of such attachments by acknowledging their actual nature is.

The second aspect is to give up all care for one’s self beyond a certain requisite point and instead recognize that “we exist primarily for the sake of one another” (8.56). This does not exclude self-regard, but it does enlarge the question of self-regard to include the regard for others as a crucial part of what makes us into ethical beings.<sup>78</sup> The reason lies in the logic of nature itself. Everyone shares “a common nature” (2.13; cf. 2.1). To be ignorant of this commonality and

77. Mansfeld 1979: 177–78 ponders the “paradox” of a providential world order that “no longer cares for individual things and phenomena,” at least during the final moments of the universal conflagration when nothing but a residual Zeus remains. However, Stoic providentiality is not equivalent to a concern for individual existents. It is a concern for the rightness of whatever obtains at any given moment in the universe. It provides a natural framework that renders existence and every event intelligible. Wrapping our minds around this (to us) somewhat alien view of what is good (for us, for the world) and learning to come to terms with it is the core challenge of Stoicism.

78. See Gill 2013: 93, who compares 2.1 (the natural affinities and kindred natures of individuals) and 2.5 (“concern for others”). See Long 2002: 201 for the same point about Epictetus. Long points to

to refuse to participate in it fully is to despise the thrust of nature, which is in its own way eccentric, not ego-centric. Love of others, common interests, shared lots, cooperation, and natural affinities are what bind humanity together (6.14; 6.39; 8.27). The provisionally circumscribed entity that we know as our “self” is something in which we are illusorily contained (8.27), not least because its nature and conditions are constantly changing: “Is one afraid of change? What, can you come about without change? And what is nearer or dearer to universal nature? (τί δὲ φίλτερον ἢ οικειότερον τῆ τῶν ὄλων φύσει;)” (7.18). To deny oneself this knowledge, this accession to a less bounded reality, is to mutilate oneself: it is to adopt the status of “a severed hand or foot” or “head” that lies “some distance away from the rest of the body”: this is what happens when an individual “is unwilling to consent to what comes to pass and cuts himself off from others or when he does something that is against the common interest [and] the natural unity” (8.34). For the same reason, to say that one’s happiness does not depend on others is true, not because happiness “depends on our own agency,” but because it depends on no one and on nothing beyond a proper stance towards nature (10.1–3).<sup>79</sup> To take up this stance is not to assume agency but to relinquish it to nature—that is, to the whole of universal nature of which we are a part. Once this stance is accepted, happiness will follow.

As we have seen, a strong component of sociability is built into Marcus’ definition of how a person can fashion herself in the way one should. This is not the obvious lesson of *Meditations* 6.8, the closest that Marcus comes to acknowledging the solitary agency of self-fashioning: “The ruling center is that which arouses itself, and adapts itself, and fashions itself according to its will (τὸ ἑαυτὸ ἐγείρον καὶ τρέπον καὶ ποιοῦν μὲν ἑαυτὸ οἷον ἄν καὶ θέλη), and makes whatever happens to it appear to itself as it wishes it to be (οἷον αὐτὸ θέλει).” But the passage is misleading if taken out of context. Compare another passage nearby, which concerns the social aspect of the soul: “he who prizes the soul in so far as it is fully rational and is concerned for society (πολιτικὴν τιμῶν) will no longer turn his mind to all the rest [of conventional distractions], but strives above all to ensure that his own soul remains rational and sociable (κοινωνικῶς ἔχουσαν) in itself and in its activity and co-operates to that end with those who are of like nature (καὶ τῷ ὁμογενεῖ εἰς τοῦτο συνεργεῖ)” (6.14). The only conclusion to draw here is that there is an ineradicable social element to our identities, one that exceeds the imperatives of self-fashioning. But if we trace this thread far enough, we arrive

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*Diss.* 2.5.26, but see also 1.23.1 and 3.13.3: “human beings are naturally sociable.” Further, Reydams-Schils 2012, on the social character of reason in the *Meditations*.

79. Gill 2013: 93 (quotation), glossing 2.8, the second half of which says no more than that goodness is a matter of “paying careful attention to the motions of [one’s] soul.” I take it that the relevant motions one should pay heed to are those changeable motions that make us what, rather than who, we are as entities in flux. Whether one can change the motions in one’s soul by attending to the changes found in nature is a different question. Surely one can to a degree. But in that case the changes one makes will be as much reactive as active, in addition to representing a constitutively unfinished business.

at an additional conclusion, namely that the soul is sociable because it is in fact *unbounded*. Let's see why.

To be sociable is, as Marcus memorably and remarkably puts it, to dissolve the boundaries between one's self and other selves. It is to "enter into the ruling center of everyone else, and let everyone else enter into your own" (εἰσιέναι εἰς τὸ ἡγεμονικὸν ἑκάστου, παρέχειν δὲ καὶ ἑτέρῳ παντὶ εἰσιέναι εἰς τὸ ἑαυτοῦ ἡγεμονικόν, 8.61; cf. 9.18: διέλθε ἔσω εἰς τὰ ἡγεμονικὰ αὐτῶν). We accomplish this communion—it is really an interpenetration—of souls in part in order to understand others' motives and reasons for acting ("to see what sort of people they are," 9.27). This is the kind of empathy and fellow-feeling that we know as friendship, whereby one stands "naked" before another in a relationship of mutual exposure and vulnerability (9.34; cf. 5.27, where the other is god).<sup>80</sup> But we also perform this other-directed impulse out of natural kinship, which is to say, owing to the *eccentric* momentum of being, which reaches far beyond what can be explained in terms of any social economies or "reciprocities" regulating the self in its relation to others.<sup>81</sup> To be is to be *other*.<sup>82</sup> To be naturally fulfilled is to empty oneself out into another. It is to embrace the universality of nature, which is governed by its own laws of cosmic love and sympathy (9.9).

This is Marcus' doctrine of the *unbounded self*. At times deeply situated within and at times eccentric, the unbounded self is mostly free of all such associations, because at bottom it describes a self that, like the world it inhabits and of which it is a part, is in radical flux. And yet at any given moment, the universe as a totality is nothing other than its constituent elements and the logic that binds them together. But even then, it remains an untotalizable concept.

This last point needs to be underscored, because conceiving the whole, which is more a matter of testing our limits than a project to be successfully carried out, is a significant component of Stoic moral self-reflection, as we saw. The world is more than its (seemingly limited) physical totality, nor can it be equated with the sum of its parts (for these are ever arising and vanishing). It has eternal (infinite) temporal extension and so too eternal movement and change, but also infinite degrees of difference or actualization within. Perhaps this amounts to the world's being "disorganized," as an objector to Stoicism might put it,<sup>83</sup> but not so for Marcus

80. Vulnerability does not exclude relative independence, which is in some circumstances more desirable than in others (e.g., 2.6). Absolute independence is, however, neither desirable nor possible. Sympathy, empathy, and community would not exist if it were.

81. Foucault normally privileges the ways in which the self stands in relation to itself. But he does make halfway gestures pointing in another direction, e.g., Foucault 1986: 148–49 (disingenuously noting how "the dominion of oneself over oneself is increasingly manifested in the practice of obligations with regard to others"; the opposite is the case: our self-dominion is in such cases lessened), 163–64 (extending others into the ambit of one's self: the other—here, a spouse—"must be treated as a being identical to oneself"; such identity is symbolic, not real); 1997: 267; 2005: 195.

82. Cf. Hadot 1992: 245: "Dans la mesure où [l'homme] est partie de ce Tout, il est les autres autant que lui-même" (emphasis in original); 139, on the Epictetian Other of 1.30.1. Cf. Vernant 1991: 328–29.

83. See Barnes 1988: 247–49.

and other Stoics, for whom tracking actualizations over time has moral import: it provides moral texture. Consider the problem of living a virtuous existence. Now divide that existence into temporal segments. As Suzanne Bobzien notes, “there were in fact indefinitely many actualizations of [the] predicate [sc., to be alive]” pertaining to Socrates “during Socrates’ lifetime.”<sup>84</sup> To account for these actualizations is to qualify Socrates’ life in addition to recognizing its temporal, changing character.<sup>85</sup> For the Stoics, motions were “indefinitely divisible,”<sup>86</sup> as were many other things: not only time (see *Sen. Ep.* 49.2–4) but also the levels of cohesion in the universe (*Med.* 6.14) and even the progression of the world through its endless stages. That said, it is a commonplace of Roman Stoicism and of earlier philosophies too that the universe can be conceived as something that is both limited and illimited, bounded and unbounded. Shuttling back and forth between these two conceptions renders the universe, understood as “the total actual state of the world,”<sup>87</sup> a dynamic entity, but also an endlessly destabilizing one. Confronting the world requires constant adjustment.

The very structure of the natural world puts pressure on our conception of how to size up its parts. The effects can be dizzying. (Marcus speaks of the intuitive response to the prospect as one that entails being “surprised and aggrieved,” θαυμάζειν ἢ δυσχεραίνειν, 10.7.) But because of the unique relationship of the universe and its constituent parts, which both are and are not self-identical depending on one’s vantage point, we might further say that the worlds of nature and of the self are both radically *extimate*, which is to say that they have no inside and no outside. Instead, each enjoys an intimate exteriority, like a Möbius band that, curving back on itself in an endless loop, is permanently in excess of itself. Of course, these two worlds are ultimately one. If you follow the path of the outer world far enough you will find yourself deep within your own world, and the reverse is true as well, though in actuality you won’t have traveled an inch.<sup>88</sup> The ethical significance of this kind of thinking is incalculable: it transforms how we think of ourselves and our “self.”

Marcus’ notion that we are transparent entities facing and interpenetrating one another but also facing outward towards nature can be deeply disturbing to a modern secular reader, but it represents died-in-the-wool Stoic orthodoxy, at

84. Bobzien 1998: 24. This interpretation of peculiarly qualified individuality has obvious bearings on ethical evaluation if we assume, as I think we should, that the category is useful not only as a metaphysical marker of identity, which is rigid, but also as a marker of moral identity, which can vary over time and situations. Ethics is dynamic. It takes the full measure of one’s life. Abstractly conceived selfhood is irrelevant here.

85. Bobzien 1998: 25: “The Stoic concept of truth is thus temporalized.”

86. Bobzien 1998: 43. We should add “infinitely extensible,” given the periodic recurrence of Socrates (and all other entities in the world) through universal conflagration and the world’s rebirth. See *SVF* 2.625 = LS 52C; Long and Sedley 1987: 1:310.

87. Bobzien 1998: 43.

88. See Miller 1988 on the Lacanian concept of extimacy.

least in its Roman editions. At 5.27 he addresses the extroversion of the self as he imagines this:

Live with the gods (συζῆν θεοῖς). He is living with the gods who constantly displays to them a soul (ὁ συνεχῶς δεικνὺς αὐτοῖς τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ψυχὴν) that is satisfied with the lot assigned to it, and who is obedient to the will of the guardian-spirit which Zeus has granted to each of us as a portion of his own being to serve as our overseer and guide (προστάτην καὶ ἡγεμόνα); and this guardian-spirit is the mind and reason of each one of us.

This is panopticism made into an ethical imperative. It is found in Epictetus (2.14.11) and in Seneca: “Certainly we must live as if we lived open to view (*tamquam in conspectu uiuamus*), as if someone could look into our innermost heart (*in pectus intimum introspicere*)” (*Ep.* 83.1), as only friends and god can, which leaves open the intriguing possibility: does self-introspection require a *third-personal* view on one’s self?<sup>89</sup> Certainly the perspective offered by Marcus suggests as much. Whenever you look at some object in the world, “whatever presents itself to your mind,” Marcus advises, “see what sort of thing it is when stripped down to its naked essence, as a whole and in its separate parts (ὥστε αὐτὸ ὁποῖόν ἐστι κατ’ οὐσίαν, γυμνόν, ὅλον δι’ ὅλων διηρημένως βλέπειν); and tell yourself its proper name, and the names of the elements from which it has been put together and into which it will finally be resolved” (3.11). This kind of elemental analysis—it is virtually a kind of X-ray vision—is as challenging to our settled perception of things as Lucretius’ glimpse into atomic reality is. It is radically destituting simply to think of extraneous objects in this way even before we turn the analysis back onto ourselves. Suppose, however, that we do. We will find that we are equivalent to our parts, which we can in no way claim to own. Not even our innermost guardian spirit, our *daimōn* or *hēgemonikon*, is exempt from the analysis: it too has an elemental character; a fragment of god, it too is not truly ours to claim or own. And yet, it is only in virtue of this entity that we can take up a third-personal view on who or what we are. Our inner *daimōn* is the embodiment of that perspective, much like an internal mirror or monitoring device.

To be sure, Marcus does recognize a kind of interiority and a kind of autonomy of the self (as Deleuze puts it, “there are still subjects, of course”), but these are heavily qualified by the overall arc of his thought and its premises. On the one hand, he recommends retreating “into” oneself whenever one wishes to discover a bit of tranquility: “for nowhere can one retreat (ἀναχωρεῖ) into greater peace or freedom from care than within one’s own soul, especially when a person has such

89. Cf. Sen. *Dial.* 11.6.1–2: “Nothing you do can be hidden from view. . . . [Other people] scrutinize your mind and observe” its inner workings. “You are not free to have any secrets.” Likewise, Epictetus admires the open-book lifestyle of the Cynic: “He mustn’t want to conceal anything that relates to him, or else he’s lost, he has destroyed the Cynic in him, the man who lives out in the open,” etc. (*Diss.* 3.22.16).

things within him that he has merely to look at them to recover from that moment perfect ease of mind. . . . So constantly grant yourself this retreat and so renew yourself" (4.3; cf. 12.3). At times Marcus gives the impression that what lies "hidden within us" is a kind of secreted agency, an inner self—"the person himself" (ἄνθρωπος)—that in its invulnerability resembles a "mighty citadel" (ἀκρόπολις) (10.38; 8.48). To this agency, the *hēgemonikon*, can be ascribed the power of self-fashioning that Marcus also, at times, acknowledges, as we saw—the capacity for self-motion and self-alteration, in virtue of which a person "arouses itself, and adapts itself, and fashions itself according to its will," and "makes whatever happens to it appear to itself as it wishes to be" (6.8; cf. 5.19). The likelihood, however, is that the retreat to within marks a moment of complete inactivity, not agency. The self here empties itself out from within in a process of self-evacuation that leaves it in a state of pure potentiality, along the lines of Zeus in the "end times."<sup>90</sup>

Even so, self-mastery is not the same thing as self-determination in Marcus' book. For one thing, the soul is never a self-identical object, nor is it the goal of the rational soul to remain self-identical, even if the principles it follows should be consistent and rational. Quite the contrary. Our natures are not given: they are breathing, changing things, constantly altering in the face of changing realities, constantly taking in and dispersing sensations and perceptions. Such is the composite nature of souls: they are literally "put together" from their environment. What we are today is not what we were at birth: "for all this was taken in only yesterday or the day before as an influx from foodstuffs or the air breathed in," all of which changes (10.7). "What can come about without change?" (7.18). We are the living proof: "And do you not see, then, that change in yourself is of a similar nature?" (7.18). Change is the law of all that is; it is the characteristic feature of universal nature (7.19, 23; 5.23; 2.17; 4.3)—just as it was for Heraclitus, to whom Roman Stoicism is deeply indebted. Marcus' term for the production of this kind of material assemblage is *suntithenai*, or "put together," not "fashion" (8.32: συντίθεναι δὲ τὸν βίον; 5.8: τῆ ποία συνθέσει; συναρμόζοντας; ἄρμονία; cf. 2.17: συγκρίνεται; 7.23: συμπαγῆναι). The one place where he uses *poiein* to convey the same thought (ποιεῖν ἑαυτό), which brings to mind the idea that a subject can indeed make itself, he quickly adds the qualification, "makes *whatever happens to it* (πᾶν τὸ συμβαῖνον) appear to itself as it wishes it to be" (6.8). The qualification indicates adaptation rather than fashioning, and this is as one might expect. Real agency is not located in subjects; it is located in *nature* (cf. 8.6), just as the verbs in 6.8 above ("arouses," "adapts," "makes appear," "happens") have as their grammatical subject nature or the *hēgemonikon*, not the self.<sup>91</sup> Even where selves

90. See at n.32 above.

91. For the distinction, which Marcus also has trouble maintaining, see, e.g., 10.24: "What does my ruling center mean to me?" (τί ἐστὶ μοι τὸ ἡγεμονικόν μου;) . . . Or is it so blended and fused with my flesh as to move at one with it?" Marcus speaks of three ruling centers: that of one's self, that of the universe, and that of others (9.22). But these are ultimately one and the same thing: the human instances stand in a partitive relation to the universal instance, and the same holds for individual versus

perform the work of fashioning (as in 8.32: “you [lit., one] must fashion [συντιθέναι] your life one action at a time”), that work is less an autonomous fashioning than an adaptation to the dictates of nature. For nothing is accomplished that is not also “in accordance with the nature of the whole” (6.9)—it “could hardly be accomplished according to any other nature, whether embracing the universe from outside, or contained within it, or existing independently outside it,” for no such outside exists nor does any part within or without subsist autonomously of nature, subjects like ourselves included (6.9).<sup>92</sup>

The lesson is clear: the constraints on a subject far outweigh its potential for independent movement. That being the case, the art of living consists not in fashioning oneself but in recognizing the limits of one’s agency that prevent us from doing just this and in responding aptly to the changes that we undergo as nature itself undergoes change (7.10; 5.10). Subjects do not “make” themselves. They *make do* with what they encounter in themselves and in the world: they are contingent beings in precisely this sense. Compare 8.50: “The cucumber is bitter? Then cast it aside. There are brambles in the path? Then step out of the way.” The role of the subject is to know its place in nature—its humble place, but also its interactive place:

It is now high time that you realized what kind of a universe this is of which you form a part, and from what governor of that universe you exist as an emanation [lit., outflow, ἀπόρροια]; and that your time here is strictly limited, and, unless you make use of it to clear the fog from your mind, the moment will be gone, as you are gone, and never be yours again.<sup>93</sup>

2.4

When we retreat into ourselves, what we discover there is not the homunculus agent that we putatively are, but rather a connection with everything that “we” are not. We discover a dynamic contingency that is never the same except in some aggregate sense that we will never comprehend but can only dimly glimpse. We stand on a precipice surrounded by “the abyss of time” (τὸ ἀχανές τοῦ αἰῶνος, 4.50)—“the immeasurable span of the past and the yawning gulf of the future” (τὸ δὲ ἄπειρον τοῦ τε παρῳχηκότος καὶ μέλλοντος ἀχανές; 12.7: τὴν ἀχάνειαν τοῦ

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universal nature. Wittingly or not, with πᾶν τὸ συμβαῖνον (a formula in his writings that is also found in Epictetus) Marcus is echoing Chrysippus’ definition of the ethical *telos* almost verbatim: “living in accordance with the experience of what happens in the course of nature ([τὸ] κατ’ ἐμπειρίαν τῶν φύσει συμβαινόντων ζῆν), for our natures are parts (μέρη) of the nature of the whole” (SVF 3.4). Needless to say, “what happens in the course of nature” or “by nature” is, of course, nature itself, which is then filtered (delimited) by what we can experience of it.

92. The same is true in the sequel of 8.32: deliberate action is both active and concessive, in accordance with the logic of practicability (πραξις). What is more, nature, too, is a compliant entity: it obeys *itself* (6.1), which may be no more than a tautology. Whatever nature does it does for a reason. What is that reason? Look for it in what nature does. Its reason is immanent to its activity and not extricable from it.

93. Cf. 2.17: ἡ δὲ οὐσία ῥέουσα. Both passages are freighted with Heraclitean echoes.



ὀπίσω καὶ πρόσω αἰῶνος). The best that a rational subject can hope to do is to *yield* to this unalterable set of conditions, to freely become what it is—an emanation of nature—and to accept its own radical contingency and fragility, and to allow that these things are “naturally so” (10.5, 7).<sup>94</sup> The stance is consistent with Stoic fatalism (the doctrine that resembles *amor fati*),<sup>95</sup> which perhaps more than anything else colors Marcus’ view of ethical attitudes and behavior: “Love only that which happens to you and is spun as the thread of your destiny (μόνως φιλεῖν τὸ ἑαυτῷ συμβαῖνον καὶ συγκλωθόμενον); for what could be better suited to you?” (7.57). Whether peering within itself or within others, whether looking up or down upon all that can be seen, the subject *glimpses* the most universal structures of nature that stand revealed to her but which are in no way objective or objectifiable in any sense that is meaningful to the human mind.<sup>96</sup> And then she gives way, ceding herself, to them. Subjects do best, on Marcus’ account, not when they interfere with nature, but when they get out of its way (e.g., 8.50). Ethical behavior, then, is concessive rather than active, or, if we prefer, actively concessive (cf. 5.10: “no one can force me to disobey [nature’s] will”): one must embrace dispersal by learning to accept that “the work of universal nature is this, to remove what is here to there, to transform it, and to take it from there and convey it elsewhere. All is change” (8.6). Everything changes, and yet nothing is ever new: it is simply renewed—and then is “swift to pass,” and finally “to vanish” (7.1; 6.36; 7.10).

One of the most intriguing features of Marcus’ account of the self, his acknowledgement that subjects are dangerously perched over an abyss of time, is in fact a little-noticed hallmark of Roman theories of the self. With it comes a good deal of uncertainty and an equal amount of urgency. Uncertainty stems from the fact that the universe in its temporal character, and in every other way, is unknown and unknowable. The self, inasmuch as it belongs to the universe as one of its elements, enjoys (or suffers) these same traits. Urgency of a moral sort

94. *Med.* 10.7: “But what if we put nature to one side, and explain matters by saying all this is naturally so?” (εἰ δὲ τις καὶ ἀφέμενος τῆς φύσεως κατὰ τὸ πεφυκέναι ταῦτα ἐξηγοῖτο). Notice the logic. Marcus is not certain about what nature truly wants (it is unfathomable; he leaves that question to one side), so he must consciously will an interpretation that permits him to accept that whatever is, happens according to nature. This is what I have been calling a perspectival shift in this essay.

95. The phrase *amor fati* does not occur in Latin, at least not in so many words. But the thought does occur in Stoicism.

96. The point for Marcus is not that nature is an object that can be known but that it is an unalterably changing entity whose only unity is that it is all that is. He shows a remarkable indifference to pinning down its ultimate philosophical nature apart from a few tidy and general principles. See 5.10: “realities are concealed,” etc.; 2.17: “our destiny [is] beyond divining.” His nonchalant indifference to deciding between competing physical theories, mostly Stoic or Epicurean (e.g., 8.17), is consistent with this stance. Such knowledge is an indifferent, morally and in every other respect. The criticism that Marcus, in his indifference and seeming eclecticism, is not a bona fide Stoic, misses the point: he was never more of a Stoic than here. Seneca holds the same view: “Time rolls on by a law that is fixed, but beyond our ken; indeed, what difference does it make to me whether something is known to nature which is unknown to me?” (*Ep.* 101.5). In other words, nature is opaque. Human nature is equally opaque, not least because it shares the same nature and the same opacity as the universe. See below on Sen. *Ep.* 121.12.

follows on the heels of uncertainty: if time is abyssal and we occupy no more than a pinprick in this larger picture, then “our” time is swift to pass indeed. “The time of our existence is a point (στιγμή),<sup>97</sup> our substance a flux (ἡ δὲ οὐσία ρέουσα)” (2.17), just as time is itself “an unending flux (ῥύσις),” filled with “murk and filth” (5.10). Opacity is a limiting condition of human knowledge and a spur to a certain kind of action, one that is truly in accordance with the way things are.

#### SENECA: THE SELF AS EXPERIMENT

Writing under the early principate (4–65 CE), Seneca recognized the same set of problems as Marcus later would: “We have wasted enough time” (*Ep.* 19.1), the little of it that we have. “Everything else is beyond our grasp [lit., is alien to us and belongs to others: *omnia . . . aliena sunt*]. . . . Time alone is ours” (*Ep.* 1.3; trans. modified), which is to say, that tiny portion of time that we know and have, our present moment: the rest, time in its totality and eternity, is a “deep abyss” (*profunda . . . altitudo*, *Ep.* 21.5). The time we know and can call ours is “a gift” on loan (*Ep.* 1.3). Here we find the two points named in connection with Marcus Aurelius, uncertainty and urgency, being held as one. That is because they effectively are one. And so too we can say that the Senecan self is a precarious self. It occupies only the minutest “point in time (*punctum*), and so much less than a point” (*Ep.* 49.3). All around that point lies a ruinous “abyss,” mere collapse and waste: “Whatever time has passed is in the same condition: it is observed in the same way and buried together (*una iacet*): everything falls into the same abyss (*omnia in idem profundum cadunt*)” (*Ep.* 49.3).<sup>98</sup> The self stands wincing on the edge of this abyss, which is both the abyss of the universe in all its unfathomability and, crucially, that of the self, a fact that is one of its darkest secrets, as will be seen momentarily.

No one is exempt, not even the bravest among us, and not even a sage. No matter how brave a person may be, he “will wince at grim experiences and shudder at sudden events (*inhorrescet ad subita*) and be blind with dizziness (*caligabit*) if he looks down on an immense depth when standing on its brink (*uastam altitudinem in crepidine eius constitutus despexerit*, *Ep.* 57.4). A fragment from Epictetus clarifies how inevitable this fear is:

So when some terrifying sound comes from the sky or from a falling building, or news of some danger is suddenly announced, or something else of that kind occurs, even the mind of a wise person (*sapientis quoque animum*) is bound to be disturbed, and to shrink back and grow pale for

97. Cf. 6.36: “the whole of present time (πᾶν τὸ ἐνεστώδες τοῦ χρόνου) is a point in eternity (στιγμή τοῦ αἰῶνος).” In other terms, it is but a part of the whole, while this same part, viewed from another angle, is a whole unto itself. This is an example of what makes the part/whole logic as dynamic as it is in Stoic thought.

98. Cf. *Ep.* 21.5: “The great depths of time will cover us up” (*profunda super nos altitudo temporis ueniet*).

a moment (*paulisper moueri et contrahi et pallescere*), not from any idea that something bad is going to happen, but because of certain swift and unconsidered movements which forestall the proper functioning of the mind and reason.

Gell. 19.1.17 = Epict. fr. 9<sup>99</sup>

This response to danger and existential nullity is not one of cowardice; it is a natural and unavoidable feeling, and it cannot be fully addressed by reason (*naturalis adfectio inexpugnabilis rationi*, Sen. *Ep.* 57.4). The self is fashioned up to a point by conscious direction and with the aid of philosophy (*me . . . transfigurari*, *Ep.* 6.1; *animum format et fabricat*, 16.3; *finges*, 31.11; *formauerunt*, 34.1), but its ultimate shape comes not from austere measures or regimens or even dialogue. Rather, it results from the confrontation with *limits*—its own—in the face of the abyssal character of nature: its endlessness, its sheer meaninglessness (when viewed from the first-personal perspective), and its extremity.<sup>100</sup> For it is only when experiences are had at the limit of what can be experienced—in *extremis*—that the self's true measure can be taken. “Every pleasure saves its sweetest moment for its end (*in finem*). So one's age is most pleasant when it is beginning to go downhill, but not yet headlong, and I judge that even the moment on the brink of collapse (*in extrema tegula stantem*) has its pleasures, or else in place of pleasures comes the very fact of needing nothing” (*Ep.* 12.5).

To stand on the brink of an abyss is to confront the enigma of nature, its vast territory of the unknown. There is much to say about this prospect, but even more to say about Seneca's willingness to approach it, and the degree of self-negation that he is willing to take on as he does. We can start with a passage from his *De providentia*, which will help to illustrate the extremity of Seneca's stance. Partway into the essay, Seneca issues some Stoic boilerplate that suggests an unshakeable confidence in his own moral invulnerability:

I am coerced into nothing. I suffer nothing unwillingly. I do not serve god, but rather I agree with him—all the more so because I know that all things come to pass by a law that is fixed and is decreed for eternity. . . . And however much the lives of individuals seem to be distinguished by great variety, the total comes to one thing: the things we receive will perish, as will we.

*Dial.* 1.5.6

99. See Inwood 1985: 176–78 for discussion.

100. Cf. 82.16, where the true force of “death” emerges clearly: it is literally a view of and from nowhere (*nusquam*). Seneca can be more dramatic and extreme than, say, Epictetus, who is quick to permit the sage's rational reflexes (his capacity for assent) to kick in, or Cicero, who reduces the dangers of the moment felt by the sage to a “small ‘bite’ (*morsus*) and a certain small contraction of the mind (*contractiuncula quaedam animi*),” likewise labeling this response “natural” (trans. Inwood 1985: 177). Zeno originated these analyses (Sen. *Dial.* 3.16.7 = *SVF* 1.215; cf. *SVF* 1.209 ουστολάς, δῆξεις). It is clearly wrong to minimize these so-called *prothumiai* or *propatheiai*.

Proud and confident in his philosophical beliefs, Seneca approaches his condition with reckless abandon: “Let nature use its bodies as it wants” (*Dial.* 1.5.8). One might suppose that Seneca’s boast that he is prepared to give himself over to nature is less bold than it appears. After all, what he is surrendering is a paltry thing, his body. What he is holding in reserve is “the best part of us,” his rational being—his living mind—that contains a spark of the divine (*QNat.* 4a.praef.20). Yet even that must perish, at least in the form that is intuitively familiar to Seneca. The mind, too, may be part of nature, but all that exists will eventually come to an end, whether through fire or inundation (Seneca, rather uniquely among the Stoics, believes in both final scenarios: *Dial.* 6.26.6; *QNat.* 3.27.1–30.7<sup>101</sup>), and not even nature and its ruling principle are exempt from the fate that they themselves dictate not just for us alone but for themselves: “Human and divine are carried along equally on a course that cannot be revoked. Yes, the founder and ruler of everything inscribed the fates himself, but he also follows them: having commanded them once, he obeys them always” (*Dial.* 1.5.8). And so, Seneca reasons, as if consoling himself, to die is to repay a debt to the universe: “Nothing perishes that is ours.” And by “nothing” Seneca means “everything,” our bodies and our minds. That being the case, he is willing “to offer himself up to fate,” not just because he has nothing to lose but because there is a grander prospect to be gained in the interim. For “it is a magnificent consolation to be carried away [or “off”] with the universe” (*grande solacium est cum uniuerso rapi*). Seneca expects to be *ravished* by nature, even if that event takes place in a future that he will never personally experience. At the limit, in the final hour of the universe’s destruction before it is reborn once again, well after he has died, there will be nothing to experience and no one to experience it, save if we wish to personify the universe as Zeus or god, something Epictetus was keener to do (*Diss.* 3.13.4) than Seneca is. To be so disposed towards this grand finale is the very height of virtue.

“See how high virtue ought to ascend!” (*Dial.* 1.5.10). The thought of self-abandonment in the name of virtue’s highest attainments conjures up an image from myth, namely that of Phaethon as he is swept up into the heavens. Ovid (*Met.* 2.63–69) provides the proof text:

The first part of the road [to virtue] is steep, and even fresh in the morning the horses can scarcely struggle up it. The highest part is in the middle of the sky, and to look on the sea and the lands from there is something I myself am often afraid to do, and *my heart trembles in quivering terror*.

The road’s furthest part is steep and calls for firm control: even then, Tethys looks up from below, *fearing that*, before she receives me in the waves that lie beneath, *I may be thrown headlong (ne ferar in praeceps)*.

*Dial.* 1.5.10; emphasis added

101. On the other hand, there are some hints of universal inundation consequent upon the final conflagration and marking a first step towards cosmogony in Chrysippus (Stob. 1.17.3; quoted in Salles 2015: 13–14). Perhaps Seneca has conflated this account with the end of the world.

Standing back from Ovid, Seneca takes the narrative reins again and proceeds to translate for us and for himself in the first person what races through Phaethon's mind, all such fears notwithstanding: "This road appeals to me: I will ascend. So valuable is it to go through those things, *even if I will fall*" (1.5.11; emphasis added). The Sun (Apollo) threatens Phaethon, to no avail. Phaethon insists that he wants "to stand in the place where the Sun himself trembles (*trepidat*)." And so he does, rising and rising, until he can no more.

The image of Phaethon's ascent—or is it an assault?—on heaven is sublime, both in a literal sense and in literary terms. There is a transgressive thrill to the thought of stepping into another realm where one does not rightfully belong. Were Seneca to follow Ovid through to the fated conclusion for Phaethon, with its wrack and ruin, the lesson would be ghastly.<sup>102</sup> The lesson, after all, is about perfecting virtue, not about immolating oneself in the process. But virtue would not be complete without the risk of self-destruction. "No great intellect is without a mixture of craziness (*dementiae*)," Aristotle wrote. Seneca quotes this approvingly, and adds that "nothing sublime and set on high (*sublime quicquam et in arduo positum*) can come to it as long as it is at home with itself (*apud se est*); it ought to desert its customary mode and be borne away and bite the bridle and carry off (*rapiat*) its rider and bear him where he feared to rise" (*Dial.* 9.17.10–11). As we shall see, virtue cannot even be *attempted*, in Seneca's mind, without taking on such profound and literally ecstatic risks. A close relative of Seneca's thinking is found in the Longinian treatise *On Sublimity*, where the author quotes and comments on the source of Ovid's verses, Euripides' *Phaethon*, and where Phaethon is now an emblem of poetic and readerly sublimity (*Subl.* 15.4). Longinus, too, knows the thrills of sublime flights. As in Seneca, who might just be a model, the thrill is centered on the ascent alone. In both cases, the fall is implicit but not shown, though it is an essential constituent of the thrill. For both, there is no sublimity without a risk of failure. And yet, the risks are not identical. All that Longinus' poets and readers risk is a failed encounter with sublimity.<sup>103</sup> What is the exact risk that is being envisaged by Seneca? In what does the prospect of a fall consist for him?

There is no single answer, in part because Seneca's image is a metaphor that operates on several different levels of meaning. On one level, what is risked is a failure to *attain* virtue. But since virtue is perfect only in the Sage, this is not a mortal risk; it is simply a human failing, one that is programmed into our existence. On another level, at risk is the failure to *attempt* virtue, which requires

102. A hint of what is to come is given in the next verses, not quoted by Seneca: *adde, quod adsidua rapitur uertigine caelum | sideraque alta trahit celerique uolumine torquet. | nitor in aduersum, nec me, qui cetera, uincit | impetus, et rapido contrarius euehor orbi* (Ov. *Met.* 2.70–73).

103. See Porter 2016: 345. No commentaries on Longinus compare the passage from Seneca, but if Longinus knows Cicero, he could arguably know Seneca. Plato's *Phaedrus* is not far off for either Longinus or Seneca, although in Plato the boundaries of experience do not present existential threats.

courage, fortitude, and any number of other moral qualities. The risk here is the risk of moral failure. On a third and final level, at risk is something grander still, the risk involved in facing the *ultimate* limit, be this death or an exposure to being “carried away with the universe” (*cum uniuerso rapi*) that entails a radical alteration in or destitution of one’s identity, which are in fact one and the same thing. And here we would have to say that Seneca’s bet is entirely hedged. After all, he calls this last prospect, which is fated more than it is chosen, “a consolation.” Why?

The answer is that to reach one’s mortal limits is, as we saw in the case of Marcus, to dissolve into the constituents from which one has been made. Seneca knows that “the human mind is composed of the same elements (*ex isdem . . . seminibus compositum*) as divine beings” (*Dial.* 12.6.8). To be returned to his divine constituents is to be one with them again: “as all matter goes up in flames” (*omni flagrante materia*), upon death “we [too] shall be returned to our original elements” (*in antiqua elementa uertemur*, *Dial.* 6.26.6–7). But the path to this return is in one significant sense an illusion. For in returning to nature, Seneca is not actually going anywhere that he already isn’t. He is, at the very moment of his writing, *already* a piece of nature and so too constituted out of its original elements. Whenever he conceives of himself in these terms, that is, whenever he recalls that he is made up of physical elements and in this way inscribes himself back into nature, he is merely redescribing himself. And so too, the path of Phaethon, understood in this way, describes a shift in perspective, not a movement to another place. It pictures another view of who Seneca is, be this as a human being attempting or risking virtue or as a piece (a “pinprick,” *punctum*) of the natural universe. It is only through such shifts that Seneca can decenter his habitual view of himself and locate it somewhere else. And it is only by accounting for himself along the lines of each of the three levels of meaning gauged by risk just mentioned, each of which implies the other—only by *risking* himself—that he can practice a virtuous existence.

We should not underestimate the terrifying quality of this shift in perspectives. What Seneca is undertaking is a kind of psychic restructuring, but also a psychic dissolution. His soul, the seat of his first-personal identity, literally goes up in flames the moment he acknowledges that it consists in fiery pneuma. Once it does, all personal characteristics vanish with it: the self, the “I,” the *hēgemonikon*, the *mens* and *animus* (the mental or psychic self), and the soul (the *anima*) are no more. All of these dissipate once they are released from the no longer vital body.<sup>104</sup> It is in retracing the path of the divine in the world of the senses and in the world beyond them, a world that can be reached only by means of reason and imagination, that Seneca finds the fulcrum of his beliefs and the ultimate tranquility of his spirit. But such a radical realignment of his view of himself is not risk-free. It does

104. See Long 2002 on the complex relationship of soul and body in Stoicism. The various terms listed here are virtual synonyms for the privileged core of Stoic identity, the rational self. The plurality of such terms reminds us once more that the self’s identity is anything but a settled question.

not mean that Seneca has domesticated the scenario of Phaethon risking life and limb to ascend to a height. Quite the contrary: the imaginary identification with Phaethon, indexed by his ventriloquism (“I will ascend . . . , even if I will fall”), is part of the experimentation with his self that Seneca continually undertakes, whether he is suffering real pains or simply imagining them. It is, in fact, part and parcel of his effort to understand nature and his place in it. Phaethon is merely the emblem of this undertaking. The cosmological equivalent to Phaethon’s fate is, of course, the circuit taken by the world as it passes into a final dissolution through universal conflagration. The dissolution of the self neatly parallels this cosmic event of nature as a whole. We might call it a “personal conflagration,” albeit one that leaves the person behind as little more than a vapor trail.

Approaching nature as a limit to be transgressed takes Seneca well beyond an insight that he stands to gain into the rational workings of the universe. To study nature is to follow a natural impulse, based on *oikeiōsis* (our inborn orientation to nature), that is sparked by wonder *and* fear.<sup>105</sup> It is also to follow an impulse to venture into boundary exploration, an effort that nature encourages, ratifies, and rewards.<sup>106</sup> As we pass through boundaries, our minds expand their reach (*crescit animus*, *QNat.* 3.praef.3). However, given the endlessness of the task and its incomensurability relative to our capacities (praef.4), such study is bound to frustrate our attempts. To know nature is by definition beyond the reach of any living individual or entire generations of individuals: its scope is too vast and, as Seneca repeatedly reminds us, the greater part of nature can in any case never be known to us: observation cannot achieve truth but only guesswork and hunches (“we are only permitted to grope around for it [sc., truth] and to advance into the darkness [*ire in occulta*] by means of conjecture,” *QNat.* 7.29.3), and “god did not make everything for human beings” to fathom (7.30.3).<sup>107</sup> Simply to recognize this is itself to make a gain: it reminds us of our human limitations. “What is most important? . . . Remembering your human status (*hominis meminisse*)” (*QNat.* 3.praef.15).<sup>108</sup>

105. *QNat.* 6.3.4: *nihil horum sine timore miramur*; cf. 6.4.1; 7.1.1, etc. Fear is instrumental to this impulse and to this study of nature. Nor does it vanish once knowledge is acquired: it leaves residual “scars” and is renewed by the insatiable need to explore nature more deeply (which is a “scarring” of its own). On the role of *oikeiōsis* as a motivational factor in aligning individuals with their natural constitutions and with nature through a desire to achieve “a cognitive grasp of oneself and the cosmic order,” see Klein 2016 (quotation at 192). The combination of fear and curiosity, both of these abetted by wonder, is indispensable: they work together to drive individuals forward as they seek this complex grasp of nature.

106. For example, god “gave the winds to enable exploration of distant regions: for human beings would have been ignorant creatures without much experience of the world (*sine magna experientia rerum*), if they were confined by the boundaries of their native soil” (*QNat.* 5.18.4).

107. *Quae an uera sint, dii sciunt, quibus est scientia ueri. Nobis rimari illa et coniectura ire in occulta tantum licet, nec cum fiducia inueniendi nec sine spe* (*QNat.* 7.29.3).

108. *Dial.* 8.5.7: “man is too mortal (*nimis mortalis*) to attain knowledge of things immortal”; *Dial.* 12.8.5: “From any point on earth you raise your eyes to the heavens on an equal basis: *there is always the same distance between all things divine and all things human*” (emphasis added).

Consequently, the study of nature as a useful moral undertaking is not designed to exalt ourselves beyond our human standing. It exists to teach us humility,<sup>109</sup> whether this means diminishing our stature with respect to the universe; exalting us to a point that can only precipitate a fall back into the abyss of contingency and change that attends the world at any moment, including those that are marked by the highest exhilaration (for the highest moments are also the least stable for Seneca); or plunging us back into elemental nature (e.g., *Dial.* 6.26.1–8; *toti se inserens mundo*, *Ep.* 66.6). And so, in the last analysis, the cosmic view is far from providing an alleviating view of nature, unless we understand by this a reconciliation with and submission to the way things are, achieved by accepting fate, mortality, and our native smallness in the greater scheme of things—in other words, by reckoning with every limit that we can know and experience (or simply infer) about the world. Virtue is not a matter of resisting these conditions but of *surrendering* to them.<sup>110</sup> One surrenders not only by accepting the inevitability of circumstances but also by convincing oneself about whatever state of affairs obtains at any given moment, whatever happens to us or to the world, that “this is naturally so” (*M. Aur. Med.* 10.7), and by “learning to wish that everything should come about just as it does” (*Epict. Diss.* 1.12.15).<sup>111</sup> Nature, so viewed, is not a source of comfort or solace. It is not redemptive. It does not relieve us of the reality of harsh limits that we have to experience. Seneca put this somewhat severely when he states that “there is no greater comfort in the face of death than mortality itself” (*nullum maius sollacium est mortis quam ipsa mortalitas*, *QNat.* 6.2.6). The only solace we can have, in other words, is to be found in the way things are.

Setting himself as an example, Seneca achieves this perspective on nature by experimenting at the limits of his experience at the two ends of the available spectrum, by confronting nature as a whole and the conditions of his own mortality and by confronting each of these with the other. Whenever the two insights come together, as they inevitably do, they produce a sense of radical precariousness and moral urgency that gives his writings, much like those of his Roman peers, their compelling quality. Seneca’s self-experimentation accounts for the totality of his philosophical essays, which either record this practice or are its site. Playing with the boundary conditions of his self requires a concomitant *self-rifacimento*:

109. *QNat.* 7.30.1: “Aristotle said, in admirable fashion, that we never need greater humility (*nos uerecundiores esse debere*) than when the gods are under discussion”; *QNat.* 3.praef.10: *multis rebus non ex natura sua sed ex humilitate nostra magnitudo est* (quoted p. 241 above). Seneca’s language of the *punctum*, the *punctum* that we are (e.g., *Dial.* 6.21.2; *Ep.* 49.3; *QNat.* 6.32.10), found also in Marcus (the *στιγμή* of time or space that we occupy), is a powerful if painful reminder of our diminished status in nature.

110. Cf. *Dial.* 11.4.1: “We can go on accusing the fates, but we cannot alter them: they remain harsh and inexorable (*stant dura et inexorabilia*); no one can influence them by abuse, not by weeping, not by arguing his case; they never spare anyone, never let them off. So let us spare ourselves tears, which achieve nothing. . . . Our minds must be rescued from empty comforts (*ab inanibus solaciis*).”

111. I am adapting and generalizing what Long 1985: 25 says about the moment of universal conflagration, which is in turn a refinement on Mansfeld 1979: 178. See n.43 above for the quotation.



“So let us shape our minds as if we have reached the end (*sic itaque formemus animum tamquam ad extrema uentum sit*)”—the end of life, the end of meaning and of rational understanding—in other words, the limiting conditions of our existence (*Ep.* 101.7). “Our boundary stone (*terminus*) is fixed where the inexorable necessity of the fates has planted it,” and it is only in view of this *terminus* that we can truly fashion a sense of who we are. Better yet, we can do so only in view of another limit, the limit of not knowing, for “none of us knows how near he is to that boundary.” The as-if quality runs through every aspect of this encounter. We are to make as if life has reached its end, in an ongoing process that can only generously be called one of self-fashioning or self-shaping, since this shaping is itself an imaginary one: it too has no fixed boundary. Rather, it belongs to a process that is steadily reshaped with every passing moment, permitting nothing more than a provisional outline that needs to be revised at every moment. The outlines are continually being redrawn whenever we reach them in the course of our life for as long as we live, until we no longer can or do.<sup>112</sup>

“How foolish it is to organize one’s life (*aetatem disponere*) when one is not even master of the morrow!”—so Seneca opens this line of thought (*Ep.* 101.4), which extends the letter’s original reflection on the brute fact of our own worthlessness and “vulnerability” (*fragilitatis*) that is impressed upon us with “every day and every hour”: “we are nothing” (*nihil simus*, *Ep.* 101.1, trans. modified). Self-fashioning is an encounter with the threat of self-disorganization and annihilation. More than this, it is an ongoing *experimentation* with an intolerable prospect, one that we nevertheless are compelled to face both morally and in order to be brutally honest with ourselves (*aliquando te offende*, *Ep.* 28.10). “Imagine this is your last day of life; or if not”—depending on your comfort level—then “the next to last” (*Ep.* 15.11). For we are, in fact, dying every day (*Ep.* 1.2; 24.20). Identically, Marcus Aurelius: “perform every action as though it were your last” (*Med.* 2.5) or “as if you had died” (7.56), because “dissolution is already under way” and “everything is dying” at every moment (10.18; cf. 3.1; 10.29). Imagine that nature is comprised of limits (and limits are both the most real and the most imaginary of mental objects). Or imagine that nature is unbounded, not physically (for the Stoic universe is a self-contained entity, at least in theory) but in every other way that matters. This too is another fiction of the mind, an unverifiable premise, but nothing more—albeit one with ethical implications for how *we* imagine the universe and find a place for ourselves in it.

Setting limits, however provisional, is the way we progress through life and the way we measure that progress, although there is no real progression being made but only a sequence of events that eventually sweeps us away. The fabled attentiveness of the Stoic mind is in fact trained on these imaginary limits: its job is to make these relative measures and limits appear to itself, even as they vanish with

112. As is widely recognized, this kind of imagining is vital to how we project and live out our lives. Its value is at once productive, criterial (a kind of litmus test), and therapeutic. See Scheffler 2013.

every second: “You have gone ahead of yourself. Set a limit (*finem*) which you could not exceed even if you wanted” (*Ep.* 15.11; cf. *Ep.* 49.4 on attending to limits [*lineas*] as they approach, yet sensed as imminent losses). The self is tempered by such tests—of its virtue, its patience, its endurance, its capacity for expansion but also for contraction, or rather for shriveling into a tiny speck: in a word, its capacity to test what cannot truly be had in experience. *The self is known only in the starkest relation to its own vulnerabilities* (*Ep.* 18.5–13; 26.3–10), *because it, too, is a limit.*<sup>113</sup> *Experimentum* covers all of these situations. Hovering uncertainly between “test” and “experience,” the word in fact stands for *an experience of limits*, whether self-imposed or imposed from without. The final irony is that these are tests one cannot pass but can only attempt. In their most radical form, they do not test (locate and identify) one’s self but only *the limits of experience itself*, so that we may learn what these are.<sup>114</sup> (Here, the self is more of a limit-function than a positive entity.<sup>115</sup>) Their collective record charts the progress of the aspiring philosophical subject. “How much progress shall I make?” “As much as you attempt” (*Ep.* 76.5)—just like nature itself, which is forever in a state of progress (that is, always in process and in motion), never ending, never fathomable, and endlessly receding before us.<sup>116</sup>

The abyssal prospect of nature has its exact mirror in the Senecan self. There exist two abysses, one without, nature’s cosmos, and one within, our very own minds. Like infants who only “crudely and superficially and vaguely (*crasse intellegit et summatim et obscure*) understand their natural make-up (*ipsam constitutionem*),”

we too know we have a mind, but we do not know what the mind is, where it is, what is its nature and from what source (*Nos quoque animum habere nos scimus: quid sit animus, ubi sit, qualis sit aut unde nescimus*). Just as we

113. Inwood is right: “The inner citadel is explicitly said to be not enough for happiness” (2009b: 63, citing Sen. *Dial.* 9.17.3). But that is not only because sociability (standing in relation to one’s peers) is an intrinsic part of self-formation but also because the self must confront its most ultimate vulnerabilities if it is to be—and to embrace—what it is. Rosenmeyer 1989 is highly attuned to these vulnerabilities (esp. 105–111); see also Dressler 2016. I now see that Manilius’ darker and more stirring moments fit into this same pattern (a connection that I missed in Porter 2016: 483–508).

114. *Ep.* 26.9: *semper descendum est quod an sciamus experiri non possumus*: “we must always learn anything that we cannot test [viz., experience] to see if we know it.” Here that limit is represented by death, but death is only one of many such limits on and of experience.

115. The idea of experience as a test is inherited. It is found in Epicurus (Sen. *Ep.* 18.9), Lucretius (see Porter 2003: 208), and Epictetus, who learned the technique from his teacher Musonius (*Diss.* 1.9. 29; 1.6.33–34; 1.20.7; 3.12.11), and who recognized that tests must come unexpectedly from without, as *περιστάσεις*, i.e., circumstances that we do not manufacture for ourselves (1.6.34), a Cynic inheritance (1.24). See Foucault 2005: 437–45 on the *topos*, which he understands more hopefully in terms of life as a whole, viewed as a preparation and education for a test that one *can* in principle pass. More realistically, life consists of a series of tests that one may or may not be able to pass (cf. *Ep.* 18.7), though the whole series, life itself, is of a different order altogether (cf. 56.15), which finally renders the criterion of success or failure irrelevant (21.5; 26.4; 26.9, quoted in the previous note).

116. *QNat.* 7.24.3: the universe (here, the celestial heavens) is never at rest, nor are we (“we teeter, surge to and fro, and collide with one another”). On the endless recession of the world’s limits, see at p. 260 above.

are aware of our own mind, *although we do not know its nature and place* (*quamuis naturam eius ignoremus ac sedem*), so all animals are aware of their own composition. For they must necessarily feel the organ by which they feel all other things; they must necessarily have a feeling they obey and by which they are governed. No man among us fails to understand that there is something that stirs his impulses; but he doesn't know what it is. And he knows he has an impulse, but he does not know what it is or its origin. (*Nemo non ex nobis intellegit esse aliquid quod impetus suos moueat: quid sit illud ignorat. Et conatum sibi esse scit: quis sit aut unde sit nescit.*) So infants too and animals have a perception of their governing part, but it is not yet sufficiently clear or articulate (*non satis dilucidus nec expressus*).

*Ep.* 121.12; emphasis added

This is one of the more profoundly gripping moments in Seneca's *Letters*. It has a complement in his *Natural Questions*:

Everybody will agree that we have a mind, by whose commands we are driven on and called back (*habere nos animum, cuius imperio et impellimur et reuocamur, omnes fatebuntur*). But what the mind is, this controller and master of ours, no one will explain to you, any more than he will explain where it is (*quid tamen sit animus ille rector dominusque nostri non magis quisquam tibi expediet quam ubi sit*): one person will say that it is breath, another that it is a kind of harmony, another that it is a divine power, a portion of god, another that it is the finest part of the soul, another that it is an incorporeal power; someone will be found to say it is blood or heat. So far from being able to acquire a clear grasp of other things, the mind is still trying to understand itself (*adeo animo non potest liquere de ceteris rebus ut adhuc ipse se quaerat*).

*QNat.* 7.25.2

The passage from *Natural Questions* brings out what is implicit in letter 121: the obscurity of the mind is rooted in the physics of nature. The mind has a composition (*constitutio*); it is made up of natural elements in virtue of which it enjoys and navigates through life. But against all expectations, the life of the mind operates for the most part instinctively, on the model of an infant and indeed of all animals. The typical Stoic response to this instinctive set of natural predispositions and movements is to focus on "the commanding element in the mind, guiding it in relation to the body" (*principale animi quodam modo se habens erga corpus*) that provides volition and direction to natural impulses (*Ep.* 121.10). Seneca knows this orthodoxy, to be sure, and he is often its exponent. But what is odd in the present case is that he is presenting the orthodox doctrine as an objection to his own argument. Far from being known, the make-up, locus, and nature of this commanding element are shrouded in obscurity. *We are unknown to ourselves*. In this respect, we are no better off than infants or animals. For if it is the case that an

infant “only understands his composition crudely and superficially and vaguely (*obscure*),” it is no less the case that we do too. This is the point of the passage from letter 121, which is bracketed on either end by a comparison with these two lower life forms. Like infants, “we too know we have a mind, but we do not know what the mind is.” We have “a perception of [our] governing part, but it is not yet sufficiently clear or articulate (*non satis dilucidus nec expressus*).” Such is our “infancy,” in the most literal sense of the word. And no matter how hard we try, the opacity of our self to ourselves “cannot be addressed” [or “be expunged and laid to rest”] by reason (*naturalis adfectio inexpugnabilis rationi*) any more than the fear that a brave man experiences while standing on the edge of precipice, as we saw earlier in letter 57.4.

The reference to nature in both cases is the key to understanding Seneca’s complex stance, which reflects an unstable blend of precarity, curiosity, pessimism, and confident optimism all at once. It is this precise combination of factors, with nature’s inexorable presence standing behind them all, that renders Seneca’s outlook an ethical one and not simply an expression of uncertainty, doubt, or philosophical confusion. Differently put, his outlook on nature, as unstable as it appears to be, grounds his ethics. Consequently, we have to acknowledge that what grounds Seneca’s ethics or morals is what *ungrounds* his perception of himself as an intact subject that is transparent to itself. The self for Seneca is not a firm entity. It is a *problem*. And that makes him a representative ancient, and not only a representative Roman Stoic.

#### ANCIENT MODERNS?

Our thrill is the thrill of the infinite, the unmeasured. . . . [We] reach *our* bliss only where we are most—in *danger*.

Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>117</sup>

Taking its cue from Roman philosophies of the self, this essay points to the need for a larger but also differently conceived inquiry into the self in antiquity—its nature, its boundaries, its conditions of emergence, and the conditions under which it is experienced. Have we classicists been boxing in the idea of the ancient subject in too narrow a fashion? I believe that we have, and that there are resources available, both ancient and contemporary, that can see us through to a richer view of the issues. Only a brief word in this direction will be possible here.

If anything of a more generalizable sort has resulted from this reading of the ethical writings of Epictetus, Marcus, and Seneca, it would have to be that the self, instead of being an object that is waiting to be described, is for them the source of endless aporias, antagonisms, discomforts, uncertainties, and riddles. But neither is the self the be-all and end-all of their most pressing concerns. The self, not only for

117. *Beyond Good and Evil* 224; trans. Kaufmann.

the Roman Stoics but elsewhere, is less the starting point of inquiry than the by-product and residue of a complex set of experiences in the face of nature and society and across any number of flashpoints, from their own or others' beliefs, actions, values, and relationships to the difficulty of sizing up their place in the world. In this they show themselves to be utterly representative ancients. Typically, it is these wider inquiries that are more determinative in ancient questions about who (or what) one is than straight-up investigations into that entity we call the "self," which is notoriously difficult to render in Greek or Latin and which consistently eludes definition in the ancient literature. At such moments, which can be traced from Heraclitus to Augustine, the self comes to light not only as a devilishly elusive and opaque entity—a problem that admits of no solution—but also as an endless abyss that threatens to endanger the subject who is seeking this knowledge.<sup>118</sup> But this essay has not been interested in locating the ancient self. It has been interested in how the pressures of natural and ethical considerations among the Roman Stoics put their conceptions of the self at considerable risk.

It is here that the Stoics begin to look strikingly modern, even contemporary, above all when they are put side by side with representatives of recent and current critical theory. Some of these theorists have already been fruitfully brought to bear on the topic of the ancient self (Freud, Lacan, Arendt, and Balibar are but four examples).<sup>119</sup> Others remain to be tapped.<sup>120</sup> Some of the most daring contemporary work that undoes the intactness of the category of the self has come out of posthumanism and ecologically informed thought (Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* being a prime example), which is now locating its bearings in Lucretian Epicureanism and Stoicism, in good measure thanks to the influence of Deleuze, a reader of Lucretius, the Stoics, and Spinoza.<sup>121</sup> Another strand developed out of

118. Examples of struggles to define the self or the soul run from Heraclitus, for whom it has no boundaries (fr. 45: ψυχῆς πείρατα ἰὼν οὐκ ἄν ἐξεύροιο, πᾶσαν ἐπιπορευόμενος ὁδόν· οὕτω βαθὺν λόγον ἔχει, 101; 115 (dub.) DK) to Aristotle (*De an.* 402a10–11), Plato (*Phd.* 88b2–3; *Phdr.*, passim), Galen (*PHP* 3.1.15), Plotinus (see Remes 2007, ch. 6 ["Losing the Limits of the Self?"], esp. 250–53), and Augustine: "I had become to myself a vast problem (*factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*)" and an "abyss" (*abyssus*) (*Conf.* 4.4.9; 10.1.2) that is "immeasurable" (*immensa*) and "infinite" (*infinitum*, 10.8.15): "I never reach the end" (10.17.26; cf. *Serm.* 340A8).

119. Freud and Lacan: Porter and Buchan 2004; Miller 2007; Zajko and O'Gorman 2013. Arendt 2003 treats Democritus, Socrates, Cato, Epictetus, and Augustine; Plato: Balibar 2012.

120. A reader may wonder why Foucault is not included in the list. The reason, hinted at earlier, is that Foucault's ancients are too tamely conceived. It is only in Foucault's final lectures on *parrhēsia* that risk becomes a factor in the formation of the ancient self. The case he foregrounds is that of the Cynics, but his argument does not convince. Though the Cynics appear to rupture all codes of conduct and intelligibility (Foucault 2010: 63; cf. Foucault 2011: 11–14, 161, 234), their risks are performative, exhortative, and tailored to the consumption of others; they are not self-endangering or existential (Foucault 2011: 180, 234). Secondly, he considers the Cynics to be an exceptional strand of thought in antiquity, and he expressly *contrasts* them with Heraclitus, Socrates, the Epicureans, and the Stoics (Foucault 2011: 181–82, 209–210), which tells us a good deal about how he reads these latter figures.

121. Ecological posthumanism and the new materialisms: Bennett 2010; Bianchi, Brill, and Holmes 2019; and Dressler 2019, an interesting precedent being Rosenmeyer 1989: 68 (cf. 74) on Chrysippus' "swarm of causes" (σμήνος αἰτίων, *SVF* 2.945 = LS 55N) understood as a globally felt "pervasive network of interrelation" and reminiscent of actor network theory, distributed agency, and

phenomenological ethics and found its way into political theorizing: this is the significance of Levinas's category of the Other, and eventually the more capacious category of "*le tiers*," which was expanded by Maurice Blanchot to embrace the impersonal, the neutral, and the anonymous, and later developed by Roberto Esposito. Examples of a productive modeling of selfhood achieved at its limits through excess, ecstatic relation, interruption, dispersal, and diaspora, all of this disrupting its claims to sovereignty, may be found in Simondon, Blanchot, Balibar, and others.<sup>122</sup> A fourth strand emerged out of earlier ethical and political theory in the wake of Hannah Arendt and, more recently, Judith Butler.

A striking component of these latter theorists is the way they link questions of ethics to a rearticulation of the self. They do so by locating the impulse to justice, responsibility, and equality at the limits of selfhood and of intelligible experience in ways that are remarkably resonant with Stoicism, as are the urgency, passion, and optimism for ethical reform that they convey. Butler puts the point eloquently: "the question of ethics emerges precisely at the *limits* of our schemes of intelligibility."<sup>123</sup> Not a single ancient author mentioned in this essay would disagree with this assessment. (It is really a diagnostic that helps to remind us that we have stumbled into an ethical dilemma.) Ethical reflection arises out of a direct confrontation with uncertainties in the course of lived experience. Socrates and Aristotle would agree.

A common premise shared by the more recent theorists, likewise found in antiquity, is the recognition that the condition of the world precedes and conditions our entry into existence. We come to the world late in the game. We inherit it without making the rules that govern it. "If the creature is 'that which owes its situation thanks to the other,' then I am born into a condition of responsibility that exists prior to my existence and that lies beyond my consent and my freedom, born, thanks to a favor that turns out to be a predestination, into the misfortune of the other, a misfortune that belongs to us all." So Blanchot, in words that with little change could have been found in any of the writings by the Roman Stoics.<sup>124</sup> Confronted with these conditions, the self is recognized by these contemporary theorists as something that is anything but self-contained. Rather, it is baffled, opaque, abyssal, destituted, de-individuated, impersonal,<sup>125</sup> othered (at times

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Deleuze and Guattari's assemblages and "swarms"; further on Deleuze and the Stoics: Sellars 2006. While the still nascent attention to the ecology of nature and the transhuman might appear to be a natural home for any ancient philosophy that articulates problems of selfhood with those of nature, it is not the only place to look for points of contact between contemporary and ancient thinking, especially in the areas of social and political ethics.

122. A too little discussed forerunner is Bernays 1857, sect. IV; trans. Porter 2015.

123. Butler 2005: 21; emphasis added.

124. Blanchot 1980: 41. This contingency of the other acting on ourselves, he adds, is not a "lack." Rather, it gives us an "excess" or "surplus of existence." Similarly, the Stoic destitution of the self, discussed above, is not so much a privation as an *overwhelming* of individuality.

125. This is the significance of Levinas's "*le tiers*" (Levinas 1979); see Deleuze in the epigraph to this essay. The critique of the first-personal perspective is the hallmark of Blanchot 1980 and Esposito 2012; see also Housset 2008. But its origins go back at least to Spinoza (see Jaquet 2017). A Stoic influence is not to be ruled out.

resembling an animal or an inhuman), other-facing, social, relational, vulnerable (which is to say, exposed to itself, others, and the world, which are themselves vulnerable and exposed), eccentric and ecstatic, estimate, and unbounded.<sup>126</sup>

What these theorists emphasize is not that ethical practices can be undertaken only after one has learned to divest the first-personal “I” of its self-arrogated rights and claims to judgment, typically organized around the notion of self-sovereignty. Rather, *it is in the very act of divesting the “I” of these prerogatives that an ethical practice is born for the first time*—not once and for all, but simply once, in a kind of rupture or break with habit and intuition that must be repeated through conscious reflection and practice, which is to say, through a practical reenactment of this primordial act of deindividuation. This kind of breakdown and rearticulation of the self is precisely what the Roman Stoics dared to risk.

The formation of ethical concepts goes the same way, for these are only as robust as the experiences they match up with—or don’t. In Stoicism, conceptions of the good, justice, and nature can be argued to arrive not from the occurrence of what they correlate to in the world, let alone in universal nature (their putative foundation), but from the way they appear to us through experience (*κατὰ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν*), imperfectly and through a lens darkly. This is built into the foundations of Stoic empiricism, but also into the theory of *oikeiōsis*, the tugs of nature that are used to explain the impulse (the predisposition) to virtue. And while contemporary theorists, unlike the Stoics, do not back ethical value through an appeal to providential nature, their example reminds us that the naturalistic foundations of Stoicism are in some respects props or cues that provoke more than they buttress an ethical vision. The urgency and passion for ethical reform that runs through ancient Stoicism is not derived *from* nature; it is generated out of a contrast *with* nature, which is to say out of the rifts and asymmetries that are perceived between our experience of the world and the world’s postulated aspirational condition. Contemporary theorists display an identical urgency and passion for ethical reform, yet they can appeal to nothing beyond their own intuitions.<sup>127</sup> In fact, both parties are taking

126. Adorno 1978: 40: “terror before the abyss of the self (*das Schrecken vorm Abgrund des Ichs*”); Blanchot 1980: 32: “cette partie ‘inhumain’ de l’homme”; Arendt 2003: 184: “a difference is inserted into my Oneness,” we discover an “other self,” and thought (the central activity of a moral creature for Arendt, both in antiquity and today) is constituted by such “interruptions” from without (98); Butler 2005: 27: “I am, as it were, always other to myself” thanks to my constitutive relation to others; Balibar 1998: 22, foregrounding “the primacy of the collective, or the transindividual, as opposed to that of the singular in the very constitution of the subject” (Balibar is indebted to Simondon 2005); Butler 2005: 100: “a common vulnerability, a common physicality and risk,” “a vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away” because it arises out of “the experience of being imposed upon from the start, against one’s will,” and which, as a consequence, brings with it a heightened “sense of responsibility” (99). Examples of a productive modeling of selfhood through ecstatic relation, interruption, and dispersal may be found in Bernays 1857, sect. IV; Arendt 1958; Butler 2005: 27, 32.

127. The same holds for philosophies prior to the Stoa, many of which presume a predisposition to virtue that is not to be explained by the providential organization of nature (e.g., Socrates and Aristotle, possibly Heraclitus and Empedocles as well).

their bearings from an identical source: the lack of fit between what is and what they want to see take place in the world.<sup>128</sup> Subjects who are prone to perceive these kinds of asymmetries and to be troubled by them are likewise prone to live dangerously on the edge: they are formed and deformed not by practices of self-fashioning or problematizations of the self that they can control but whenever they encounter themselves, unexpectedly, “at the limits of intelligibility.”

The trouble with current readings of the self of Roman philosophy, and with discussions of the ancient self more generally, is that they don’t catch this aspect of the self’s formation, the sheer dangers of its utter contingency and radical fragility.<sup>129</sup> Philosophically achieved selves are not “formed” in antiquity, nor do they “emerge” in antiquity. They are ongoing *emergencies*, ongoing experiments in living on the edge and *in extremis*, the aim of which is to find an ethical relationship not in the first instance to one’s self, but rather to the unfathomable dimensions of the world in all its absolute and irrevocable facticity. Only at this price of radical destitution is a relationship to oneself and to others possible. The experience of the self is that of a never-ending crisis. Reading these documents from the past, we can immerse ourselves in a culture that valued neither cognitive certainty nor self-mastery but something far more precious: the dangerous experience of becoming who we are.<sup>130</sup>

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128. See Balibar 2012: 24–27, where he suggests, following Marx, that the “experience of *injustice*”—of oppression, inequality, the negation of liberty—is what precipitates the recognition of justice and the progressive project of its repair. Compare Inwood 2005, ch. 10 (“Getting to Goodness”) and Annas 2007: 68–69 and 79 on the parallel derivation of the idea of justice from experience and from universal nature (M. Aur. *Med.* 11.10; Chrysippus in Plut. *Stoic. rep.* 1035c-d). The same has to be true for our idea of nature, though this is not discussed by either scholar. Because we never see nature whole (as Nature), we leap to the concept by making inferences based on our experience. The result is one more asymmetry: our idea of nature is as imperfect as are the ways it appears to us.

129. Two stellar exceptions are Herington 1966, esp. 433, and Rosenmeyer 1989, who expands on Herington. See also Edwards 1997, esp. 34 on the rhetorical, theatrical (performative), and agonistic dimension of the self in Seneca, which results, among other things, in a splitting or multiplication and even an active concealment of selves rather than their seamless unification, let alone objectivity. On Seneca’s views of perfectionism and their theatricalization, see Bartsch 2015. However, the true measure of the Senecan self is not the multiplication of presentational roles but their destitution and denuding. Cf. *Ep.* 26.5: “I am preparing myself without hesitation for the day when I will cast away tricks and disguises and pass judgement on myself, whether I am talking bravely or feel that way, whether the defiant phrases I have tossed out against fortune are a pretence and a mime. Take away men’s assessment [by others] . . . Take away the pursuits that have occupied all my life”; also *Ep.* 76.32: “But when you want to embark on a true assessment of the man and know what he is like, look at him naked (*nudum*).”

130. Thanks to Brooke Holmes, Daniele Lorenzini, Ramona Nadaff, Mario Telò, and anonymous readers for valuable comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks go to Tony Long, who generously commented on the earliest and latest versions of this essay.



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