Esoteric Stoicism

by Cologero

Do not go outside, go back into yourself: the truth dwells in the inner man. ~ St. Augustine

Three factors go into creative misreading.

Place it in a larger context

Draw out its logical conclusions

Extract a deeper meaning

In this post, we will see how the key concepts of Stoicism were reworked. Stoicism was an exoterism because it held that the representations in the mind were of objects in the material world. However, when the entire psychic contents become the data of analysis, these same concepts lead to an esoterism. We can see that the modern mind is more inclined to the Stoic understanding of the inner life, which reveals a reversion to paganism. The following phenomenological analysis of Stoicism and the Church Fathers will bring to light the workings of the mind.

Stoicism in the ancient world provided an appealing worldview based on living a rational and ethical life. Its weakness lay in its materialism and empiricism. The Stoics held that everything is corporeal so that immaterial or spiritual reality did not exist. The soul is constituted of finer matter while the body of God is the cosmos. Nevertheless, the cosmos is animated by Logos which had the attributes of thought, consciousness, and providence. In this pantheistic system, everything is a part of God. Hence, God determines all that happens so that there is no distinction between Providence and Destiny. All is fated.

The concept of the Logos, therefore, was known before the Gospel of John, including its identification with God. With their deeper understanding of the Logos, the Church Fathers reworked certain key Stoic concepts into a larger framework. They did this by interiorizing the Stoic’s materialism. In particular, the following seven concepts will illustrate how that process worked:

The governing principle of the human soul

Preconceptions

Representations or Phantasies

Assent

Relation

Ataraxy or Tranquility

Apatheia or passionlessness

The Human Soul

For the Stoics, the idea of lower centers in the soul made no sense. If God is Logos or Reason, and the soul is part of God, there cannot be any irrational part of the soul. Rather they recognized a governing principle. Concepts reside in it and it is the faculty which exercises judgment and applies concepts to particular situations.

This is clearly the intellectual center of the soul, without making the distinction between intuitive and discursive reason. When this principle guides a person’s life, he is happy and free from passions. Whereas for the Stoic this highest state is natural, for the Fathers it is supernatural. The governing principle is the activity of inner attention, the power of discrimination between good and evil, and even sacred contemplation. Obviously, that is the activity of the higher intellectual center or nous.

Since the Fathers do not deny the irrational appetitive and emotional parts of the soul, they need to be transcended.

Preconceptions

The Stoic concept of preconception is that they are innate principles common to all men. As such, they are not contradictory, but become contradictory when applied to concrete situations in different ways. The purpose of education is to learn how to apply these preconceptions to specific instances in conformity to nature. Epictetus provides some examples: knowing good from evil, beautiful from ugly, knowing what one ought to do and not to do. Other things, such as mathematics, are not innate and need to be acquired.

The Stoics and Fathers agreed that there is innate moral knowledge. However, the Christian understanding of conscience goes beyond that. Not only is it a moral guide, it is also the impartial moral judge. Without that judge, the Stoic follows his preconceptions.

However, for the Fathers, preconceptions also include negative elements: prepossession, prejudice, a predisposition to sin. These need to be opposed and eradicated. These days we hear that so and so has a “good heart”. This is more in tune with the Stoic ideal. However, preconceptions can prevent the right decision. Prejudice or the desire to please will cloud our judgment. Negative preconceptions need to be expunged before they become passions.

Representations

A phantasy in Stoicism is an impression made in the mind by an external object through the senses. As in the past, we will use the term “representation” instead of “phantasy” due to the unfortunate connotations of the latter term. The problem for the Stoics was to distinguish illusory representations from true ones, and they provided some criteria to do that. In that, they agreed with Socrates that the Stoic should not accept a representation as true without subjecting it to critical examination. Epictetus pointed out the need for inner attention to discriminate between acceptable and unacceptable representations. In this regard, the teaching is sound.

The Fathers then brought this idea into a wider context. Our inner attention and discrimination should not be limited just to the impressions of the external world, but should include all the contents of the soul: thoughts, concepts, memories, dispositions, and so on.

The Fathers realized that much of our inner life is demonic. The Stoic must deny that because in pantheism, everything is God, so there cannot be anything demonic. However, once you get past the Hollywood style depiction of demons, then this realization will make sense. Of course, the modern mind regards all inner soul contents as “natural”, not unlike the Stoics, so they are compelled by that logic to accept demonic influences as fully natural, with just the echo of moral preconceptions to restrain them.

Note how this coincides with our earlier discussions. First, representations are accepted uncritically as true or good: this is how it is for the bulk of people today. The philosopher, in the next stage, learns to question or judge the representations. In the third stage, the representations are seen for what they are.

Assent

Once representations are recognized as true or false, good or evil, then one must either assent to them or reject them. Otherwise, says Epictetus, “if we fail to do this, the impression will take possession of us and go off with us wherever it will.” There are many examples in the news illustrating how an initial impression, if left on its own, will lead to unnatural or even insane acts. The modern mind has been losing that faculty of discrimination.

The Fathers used this Stoic insight in their understanding of temptation, as shown in this analysis:

First a suggestion comes into our mind via a representation or thought

Then there is a mingling of the suggestion with our own thoughts

This is followed either by opposition or assent to the suggestion

If there is assent, then sin is the result

Assent then leads to enslavement, so that the same temptation is repeated with the same result

The refusal to assent results in spiritual combat which will lead to victory or defeat

Relation

An important philosophical category of being for the Stoics is relationship: to your body, to God, to those who live with you, and so on. The Fathers also adopted this notion in regard to our relation to God, our fellow men, material things, and secular values.

There is a binding character of psychical relations, which is on a scale. The human soul establishes relations between itself and various things such as money, possessions, glory, and people. Relations involve two things:

An awareness of the existence of things or persons.

An emotional or conative attitude towards them.

This attitude binds the soul to them in stages:

First, there is an interest in a thing, a “feeling towards” it.

When the interest gets stronger, an emotional response, called a “passion”, arises.

Finally, the relation may become one of bondage or enslavement. E.g.:

Avarice: bondage to money

Greed: bondage to material possessions

Ambition: bondage to human glory

Lust: bondage to sex

To be free, a person needs to overcome such bondages. Obviously, it is easier to do this at stage (1) rather than (3), but it takes inner discipline to recognize something that subtle.

Ataraxy

Ataraxy is the state of the soul which is peaceful, undisturbed by external events, thoughts, phantasies, desires, or emotions. For the Stoic, following the governing principle and living according to reason will lead the wise man to this state.

The Fathers recognized a similar state without, however, considering it the highest state. As such, ataraxy is a natural state. This state of inner quiet or tranquility is a preparatory stage for union with God, or theosis — or the Supreme Identity as some Traditional writers have phrased it.

The Stoics lived in cities, full of noise, turmoil, and distractions; they tried to reach the state of tranquility in that environment. The Fathers, however, held that outer tranquility was necessary for inner tranquility. Hence, they retired to the desert or the mountains or any quiet, solitary place.

In our time, however, we have to hark back to the Stoics and achieve Ataraxy in the midst of our everyday life. It is not outer things that ultimately perturb us, but rather our own cares, passions, temptations, etc.

Apatheia

Alongside ataraxy, apatheia, or passionlessness, constitute the highest Stoic ideal. The modern world has lost the understanding of that state, since “apathy” has taken on a negative connotation, not indicative of the highest state. A fortiori, the modern mind is instead impressed by passion or emotion. The intensity of feeling is the measure of truth. I don’t need to provide examples, since you can find them everywhere.

The Stoics unfortunately overdid it, regarding all emotions as sinful, irrational, or unnatural. They identified pleasure, grief, fear, and desire as the four chief emotions. This is an unsatisfactory position since it will lead to contradictions.

The Fathers, instead, equated “passions” just to negative emotions. Hence, there are some distinctions to be made about what is properly a negative emotions:

Those emotions which are bad in themselves: e.g., conceit, gluttony, lust, vanity, pride, greed, malice

Those emotions which are bad only when contrary to nature: e.g., anger, hatred, sorrow, fear. When these emotions are in conformity to our nature, they are not “negative emotions”. So, for example, misplaced anger is negative, but anger directed against an injustice is not.

Pleasures and desires: Once again, these depend on the object. For example, a normal desire for food, rest, or sex is not negative. Negative pleasures and desires are of two types:

Excessive: For example, when the desire for food becomes gluttony

Disordered: For example, when the desire for food becomes coprophagia

Sorrow for sins, fear of God, fear of hell, are not passions, or negative emotions, in this sense. Rather, the impel us to reject temptations and regain the health of the soul.

Love becomes the highest goal, even higher than apatheia. Love, in this sense, is more than worldly friendship or family affection; it is a spiritual love. The overcoming of negative emotions, the state of apatheia, is preparation for this higher stage.

Esoteric Platonism

Posted on 2015-06-11 by Cologero

He was awaiting the city with foundations whose architect and demiurge is the God. ~ Hebrews 10:11

God bears in the intelligible world to reason and its objects the same relation which the sun bears in the visible world to sight and its objects. ~ Plato, Republic

Besides Stoicism, Platonism and Aristotelianism were also reworked in the transition from the Philosophical to the Religious consciousness in the West. Again, this process involves seeing the earlier philosophies in a large context while bringing out its deeper meanings in the light of transcendent revelation. The Philosophical consciousness was focused on Thought, whereas the Religious consciousness was focused on a change in the level of Being. There are two claims that can be made explicit:

Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics together present the highest intellectual teachings in Pagan civilization.

The way the Church Fathers reworked those teachings is an advancement.

Claim (1) is really indisputable. The neopagans may reject it typically through a philosophy of “vitalism”, which regards the body and soul life as primary, thereby rejecting a higher intellectual or spiritual life. This position can be rejected philosophically, but poses a danger either by distracting those otherwise interested in Tradition, or by coming to power in an orgy of destruction.

Claim (2) speaks for itself. While absorbing the rationalism of Greek thought, it adds the empirical element, a sort of “metaphysical positivism”. However, since it requires a change of Being, it cannot just be “thought”, it is beyond thought. Spiritual exercises are necessary. This combination of rationality and spirituality is rare, either because of lack of a suitable guide or lack of motivation.

Oddly enough, claim (2) is typically rejected by the “super-correct” who reject this introduction of “pagan elements” into the purity of the Gospels. This is often accompanied by an unconscious crypto-paganism that imagines a Zeus-like god residing in a material heaven not much different from Mount Olympus, all while claiming to be Christian.

The following will all make sense to men of Tradition, since Guenon regards it as an authentic metaphysic. What, then, is required, is an intellectual conversion. That is, to begin to see and understand man, the world, and God in the light of these teachings.

Introduction

Constantine Cavarnos specifically mentions the following topics from Plato and Aristotle as the most influential on the Fathers. The Fathers did not regard the two philosophers as essentially opposed to each other. We will provide a brief introduction to each of them, usually by combing them into a single section.

Plato Aristotle

Sensible and Intelligible Realms

God as Demiurge

Tripartite division of soul

Four Chief Virtues

Unity of the Virtues

Virtues as Beautiful

Matter and Form

Conception of God

Immaterial Being

Categories of existence

Moral excellence or Virtue

Four causes

World of Ideas

Plato distinguished between the sensible realm and intelligible realm. Julius Evola described the same teachings in the first chapter of Revolt Against the Modern World.

Sensible Realm. Physical order, visible, perceived by the bodily senses, changing, phenomena, appearances, destructible or mortal things,

Intelligible Realm. Metaphysical order, invisible, apprehended by the mind, ideas, unchanging, indestructible or immortal things

While Plato was unsure of the precise nature of the intelligible realm, the Fathers realized that the ideas pre-existed in the Mind of God. This is what Rene Guenon claims in the Multiple States of Being.

To be clear, this teaching is not a “theory”, one possible worldview among many others. Rather it is knowledge or gnosis itself. No one is clearer about this than Julius Evola, not even the Christians. He writes in the very first chapter of Revolt Against the Modern World:

Anywhere in the world of Tradition, both East and West and in one form or another, this knowledge has always been present as an unshakable axis around which everything revolved. Let me emphasize the fact that it was knowledge and not “theory”. As difficult as it may be for our contemporaries to understand this, we must start from the idea that the man of Tradition was aware of the existence of a dimension of being much wider that what our contemporaries experience and call “reality”.

Hylemorphism

Aristotle expressed a similar teaching as the distinction between matter and form, in which matter stands for the sensible realm and form (or Idea) correspond to the intelligible realm. Aristotle mistakenly rejected the independent existence of the forms or ideas. Of course, the Fathers rejected Aristotle’s belief that matter and form are uncreated.

This doctrine is called Hylemorphism. Guenon pointed out similar teachings in the Samkhya school of Vedanta.

God

Plato and Aristotle contributed to the understanding of God, although in different ways. From Plato, came the idea of God as Demiurge, artist, architect, creator.

Platonic ideas:

God is beyond being

God created the world as a likeness to an eternal model

The “inexpressible beauty” of God.

The physical universe is beautiful

God is the Idea of the Good

God bears in the intelligible world to reason and its objects the same relation which the sun bears in the visible world to sight and its object

The main objection is that Plato believed that matter was eternal and the Demiurge merely molded it; of course, matter is also a creation of God. These are some corollaries of Plato’s conception:

If God is beyond being, he cannot be a being Himself. Most people today imagine God as some powerful being out there.

The world did not arise from material processes by chance. Rather it has developed in conformance with a Divine ideal.

As the cosmos is good and beautiful, neither Plato nor the Christians are “world denying”. Rather, the world is understood as an element in a hierarchy of being.

God is not some great being “out there, right now”. Rather, He is like the Sun in our consciousness, bringing the intelligible realm of ideas into our awareness.

While Aristotle misunderstood that God was the Creator and Providential (unlike Plato in both cases), he can still give us a deeper understanding of God:

God is a substance

God is immaterial

God is unmoved

God is impassive

God is pure act

Since we are called upon to strive to attain likeness to God, we need to reach the state of passionlessness. Don’t forget that this means freedom from “negative emotions”, not from all emotions.

The Soul

Although Plato and Aristotle seem to have different conceptions of the soul, they are harmonizable. The Fathers accepted Plato’s tripartite division of man as body, soul, and spirit as well as his teaching on its powers or parts. However, unlike Plato, they held than man is a body-soul, not just a discarnate soul. They likewise accept the three powers of the soul:

The appetitive (epitheymetikon). Directed toward sensual pleasure and material gain.

The spirited (thymos). Directed toward ruling, conquering, fame.

The rational (logistikon). Directed toward the true, the good, and the beautiful.

The Fathers broadened the understanding of these powers. The appetitive function can be sublimated and directed toward what is really necessary to be fully human: to the virtues and to God and His Will.

The spirited function should be directed against inordinate and wrong desires, but also against demons, for we wrestle not just against flesh and blood.

The Fathers include inner attention, meditation, and prayer in the rational function. Thus we see that there is both a lower and a higher aspect to each function.

In association with these functions, there are three possible states:

Contrary to Nature. One of the nonrational powers governs the soul, and the rational part is enslaved.

In Accordance to Nature. The rational part of the soul governs the whole soul.

Above nature. One lets God rule the soul its thoughts, feelings, desires, and so forth.

Plato only recognized the first two, which is the limit of the philosophical consciousness, while the Fathers realized the state above nature. Mark the Ascetic describes this state as:

where the mind finds the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which the Apostle Paul called love, joy , peace, and so on.

John Climacos says that:

in this state one has the indwelling God Himself governing him in all his word, deeds, and thoughts. Wherefore through illumination he apprehends the will of the Lord within himself as a certain voice and transcends every human teaching.

Immaterial Being

Besides composite substances (i.e., composed of form and matter), Aristotle recognized the existence of simple, immaterial things consisting of form without matter. God, angels (which Aristotle believed to be subordinate gods), and the soul are immaterial.

In particular, man’s intellectual center is immaterial. That means it can know essences directly, intuitively, without “becoming” the thing in matter. These we know through thinking, or correct thinking, since most of our thinking is either contrary to nature or contrary to God. Here, Esoteric Stoicism teaches us the importance of discriminating our thoughts and rejecting the useless and harmful ones.

Thus, our experience, say, of demons comes through our thoughts, not from artistic, or not so artistic, pictures. Hence, demonic activity in our consciousness is not so easy to recognize, since it is experienced as one thought among others, not in terms of a sensible image of an ugly demon. Au contraire, the thought may appear quite beautiful and pleasing to your self-esteem.

Another way to understand thoughts is the experience of what Guenon calls “possibilities of being”, i.e., they may be experienced as various thoughts or impulses. Of course, the free man transcends this and can decide whether or not to act on such thoughts, while the ordinary man simply accepts most everything that crosses his mind.

Virtues

Both Plato and Aristotle wrote on the virtues, and those ideas were further developed by the Fathers. Since these sections are rather long and we have written often on this topic, we will save it for another day.

Categories

Aristotle identified 10 categories of being, which were used in different contexts by the Fathers. These are:

Categories of Being

Substance

Quality

Quantity

Relation

Place

Time

Position

State

Action

Passion

Fundamental is substance, both material and immaterial. Quality is given primacy over quantity. Things are in relations.

Space is different when speaking of material and immaterial substances. For the former, it refers to physical space and for the latter, mental space. For example, there are three different interior spaces:

Contrary to Nature. The soul forgets or ignores God and His justice, an “unholy, demonic, place” rendered desolate by demonic, impassioned, negative thoughts.

In accordance with Nature. The place of clear self-knowledge and repentance.

Above Nature: the soul rises to prayer and experiences the fruits of the Holy Spirit, e.g., love, joy and peace.

Spatial (above) and temporal (after) metaphors and symbols are used in spiritual writings to describe transcendent states. Not recognizing that these refer to inner or mental space, the common mind tries to imagine the transcendent in terms of a physical space “out there” or of a hereafter as a continuation of physical life in everlasting time. Rather, Joseph Ratzinger explains that Eternal Life is:

The kind of life man may graciously come to possess in relationship with God who is life. Eternal life begins in this life through a person’s knowing God and entering into communion with Him.

“State” is also a misunderstood category. Particularly if one is attached to sensible images of spatial and temporal metaphors, it may be confusing to regard Heaven, for example, as a state of being. Once you understand that being human is itself a state of being, then it will make more sense. It does not deny that Heaven is a place, just that it is a material place.

The application of categories of being is a large topic. Begin understanding the world in terms of these categories in order to attain the intellectual conversion.

Causes

Cavarnos does not mention Aristotle’s doctrine of causes, but we’ve added it since it is very important, at least in the West. Again, begin by applying this doctrine to events in your life and in the world. As we’ve pointed out, Science rejected formal and final causes while retaining material and efficient causes. You will often read that science has “shown” that final and formal causes don’t exist, somehow forgetting that was the assumption, not the conclusion. We will say more on this when describing the transition from the Religious to the Scientific consciousness.