Stoic Providence: Cosmology and Ethics United

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Throughout history philosophers and theologians have dealt with a concept known as Providence. Providence has traditionally been understood as God's foreknowing and protective care for the world, and implies that the world is ordered according to a divine plan. The idea has been associated with other notions, such as fate, which may be held as integral to the very conception of Providence, although Providence holds the fate of the world-order more specifically to be working out for the best possible end. This paper will investigate Providence as it was conceived by the Stoics, beginning from the earliest of their school, Zeno, up until the writings of Seneca. What is Providence for the Stoics and how does it differ from fate? The findings of this study will be that the Stoics held Providence to be due to God's rational ordering of the cosmos, that God in some sense is the cosmos, and thus the perfection of God is indistinct from the perfection of the cosmos. A difference can also be seen between the early and later Stoics. For the early Stoics, Providence is more of a cosmological speculation, whereas for the later it is a term of great ethical significance. In the end, Stoic cosmology and ethics are united in Providence.

One of the earliest pieces of evidence concerning the Stoic notion of Providence comes from Diogenes Laertius' account of Zeno's philosophy. Diogenes first mentions Providence in the context of a number of cosmological inquiries which include "what the substance of the universe is, whether the sun and the stars are made up of form and matter, whether the world has had a beginning in time or not, whether it is animate or inanimate,

whether it is destructible or indestructible, whether it is governed by providence, and all the rest."[1] Providence is therefore conceived by the early Stoics as an issue of cosmology, understanding the universe as a whole, and it was held more specifically to belong "to the physicists alone," who were concerned about the physics or nature of the universe.[2] The Greek word here translated as "providence" is "διοικειται," which in its nominative form "διοίκησις" can be defined as "house-keeping: management, government."[3] There is accordingly implied some rational agency behind the Stoic notion of Providence, even if it is to be understood abstractly, for it would be hard to understand house-keeping, management, or government apart from a rational concern for something.

This last suggestion receives some support where Diogenes says, "The world, in their view, is ordered by reason and providence," and attributes this view to Chrysippus' long-lost treatise *On Providence* and also to Posidonius' *On the Gods*.[4] Basically, the idea is that there is a reason for the world order existing as it does, that the entire universe is rationally organized. One interesting thing that should be noted here is that Diogenes claims both authors to hold that "reason pervades every part of it, just as does the soul in us."[5] If reason pervades every part of the universe, then it could be said that the rational principle behind its organization is not separate from the universe itself. Stoic Providence does not posit a supreme being to exist separate from the universe, to which order is imposed—that is, the

[1]R. D. Hicks, ed. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Diogenes Laertius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1972), 133.

[2]R. D. Hicks, ed. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Diogenes Laertius*, 132.

[3]Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon Abridged* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 174.

[4]R. D. Hicks, ed. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Diogenes Laertius*, 243.

[5]Ibid.

world-order is not the product of a rational subject apart from the universe as object.

Providence is due to the reason of the universe itself, which was considered by Antipater of Tyre to be "a living being, endowed with soul and reason, and having aether for its ruling principle."[6] This is a somewhat pantheistic, or perhaps panentheistic, conception of God and the universe, but it would be hasty to conclude that the Stoic God is more of a metaphor and not a genuine agent. The language in this case would seem to indicate otherwise, for holding this being to be living, having both soul and reason, and even possessing aether, are all things that would seem to belong only to an agent, properly speaking. Regarding the seeming pantheism of the Stoics, Diogenes says they applied the term cosmos, or universe, in three different ways, using it

> (1) of God himself, the individual being whose quality is derived from the whole of substance; he is indestructible and ingenerable, being the artificer of this orderly arrangement, who at stated periods of time absorbs into himself the whole of substance and again creates it from himself. (2) Again, they give the name of cosmos to the orderly arrangement of the heavenly bodies in itself as such; and (3) in the third place to that whole of which these two are parts.[7]

From the above quotation it can be seen that the Stoics conceptually distinguished "two parts" within the cosmos, the divine part that actively shapes the universe, and the universe subject to this arrangement. Although they are distinguishable as parts, they are parts of the same whole, and so the cosmos can be considered responsible for its own composition and arrangement. One might speak of it as a self-organizing or regulatory system, which in itself had no beginning, but is nevertheless undergoing constant transformation due to its own divine agency acting upon the material world.

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid., 242-3.

Some Stoics apparently did hold Providence to be due to a rational agency in certain parts of the universe, more than others, and exercising its rule over the whole. Concerning reason's diffusion throughout the universe, it is said: "there is a difference of degree; in some parts there is more of it, in others less."[8] Diogenes cites Posidonius as holding heaven to be the predominant ruler, Cleanthes the sun, and Chrysippus the heaven, but more specifically Cleanthes held it to be a pure aether pervading everything in the air, and thereby plants, animals, and the entire earth.[9] The function of divine rule was explained in two ways: (1) as a force compacting, or holding together, all parts of the universe into a unified whole; or (2) as a divine intelligence passing through the universe and organizing its parts into a cohesive whole.[10] There was thus room for different understandings of the agency through which Providence worked.

The last important piece of information we have from Diogenes concerning the early Stoics' understanding of Providence is "that divination in all its forms is a real and substantial fact, if there is really Providence."[11] This statement comes within a discussion of fate, wherein "[f]ate is defined as an endless chain of causation, whereby things are, or as the reason or formula by which the world goes on."[12] Evidently the idea of Providence is closely connected to the concept of fate: if there exist chains of causes within the universe, there must of necessity be subsequent effects—and vice-versa—and these chains of causes and effects are interwoven in an unbreakable series stretching indefinitely backward and

[8]Ibid., 243.
[9]Ibid.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid., 253.
[12]Ibid.

forward in time. All of this could only be conceived as occurring within the providential world-order. In other words, future events are fated, or determined, to occur, and nothing can prevent their future occurrence. In such a fatalistically determined universe it is only natural to hold that if certain causes could be identified in the present, then one could be certain of effects that must follow in the future. Divination, in various forms, was considered a legitimate means of making such identifications and thereby ensuring knowledge of future events. Thus, (1) Providence being indicative of fate, and (2) fate of divination, by hypothetical syllogism (3) Providence was held to imply the truth of divination.

Although some Stoics held divination to be a science, and from the above quotation they seem to have maximally endorsed it, "divination in all its forms is real"—an endorsement of not merely astrology, but seemingly many other forms of divination—not all Stoics embraced divination. Diogenes reports that "Panaetius denies that divination has any real existence."[13] One may consider that even if Providence and fate were true, this does not necessarily imply that humans have the means of making proper identifications of certain causes needed for acquiring knowledge of future events. In other words, Panaetius might have countered that fate does not imply the truth of divination, even though the concept of fate is inseparable from Providence.

Having looked at Diogenes' account of how the earlier Stoics understood Providence, it would be useful to examine a broader range of time and see how Providence was both conceived and received by others. How did the Stoics conceive of God's ordering of the

[13]Ibid., 253.

universe? According to Sextus Empiricus, the Stoics held the whole of the universe to be finite and surrounded by an infinite void. The universe by itself was designated the "whole" and both universe and void, taken together, were called the "all":

> The Stoic philosophers suppose that there is a difference between the 'whole' and the 'all.' For they say that the world is whole, but the external void together with the world is all. For this reason they say the 'whole' is finite, since the world is finite, but the 'all' is infinite, since the void outside the world is such.[14]

Because the infinite void is not part of the whole of the universe, it would not be subject to Providence—it is after all nothingness and incapable of acting or being acted upon. The Stoic Cleanthes, and probably most other Stoics, held that only bodies can affect bodies, and because the void is not part of the extended body of the universe, it would be outside the workings of Providence: "no incorporeal interacts with a body, and no body with an incorporeal."[15] Body was conceived simply as a solid extended in the three dimensions of height, width, and depth. Providence would apply only to the whole of the world, which was conceived as one great body of a limited size and shape, but whose constituent substance, the prime matter of which bodies were composed, was essentially formless and only put into the definite form of elements by a pervasive rational principle, *logos*.

This rational principle was itself conceived as the highest faculty of the soul by which God passed judgment and guided the imposition of order on matter. Interestingly, Stoic physics necessitated that all three—God, soul, and matter—be posited as corporeal bodies

[14]A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Translations of the Principle Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 268.

[15]A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Translations of the Principle Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*, Vol. 1, 272.

in order to account for this divine agency.[16] Whether or not reason, being part of the soul, was also considered to be body or merely inseparable therefrom is not immediately clear from the surviving Stoic writings. However, it would seem to need some connection to body in order to be efficacious, and if it were identifiable with God, or the active principle that shapes passive matter, then there would be "overwhelming" evidence that it was corporeal, according to the scholars, Long and Sedley.[17]

According to Calcidius, the rational principle of the universe was immanent in matter, and because matter existed from eternity, so too has the rational principle existed from eternity: "since it is equally without origin or perishing, because it does not arise from something non-existent and will not perish into nothing, it does not lack breath and vitality from eternity, to set it in motion rationally."[18] On this understanding, there never would have been a time when the cosmos was not actively transforming itself, and it fits nicely with the Stoic view that the universe is cyclical, going through various elemental stages before a great conflagration into fire and a renewal of the process. The beginning and end stage of this transformation is fire, and the intermediate stages, through rarefication and mixture, bring about air, water, earth, plants, and animals.[19]

The cyclical process of transformation is everlasting due to the self-sufficiency of the world;[20] however, the Stoics seem to have thought it was theoretically possible for the world to be destroyed. If the parts of something can conceivably be destroyed, then so too

[16]Ibid., 272-73.
[17]Ibid., 274.
[18]Ibid., 269.
[19]Ibid., 275.
[20]Ibid., 277.

could the whole: “They [the Stoics] also suppose that the world is perishable, since it is generated on the same principle as perceptible objects, and anything whose parts are perishable is perishable as a whole.”[21] The conflagration of the world into the fire from which it came was the result of Providence, and it was the means of the continuation of the world-order.[22] Due to the theoretical perishability of the universe and the fact of its unending continuation, the conflagration into fire and recurrence of the cycle would have been a most miraculous means of survival. The world could not survive without this conflagration.

One difficult question for Stoic Providence is whether the Stoics conceived of the cyclical world process as extending backwards in time ad infinitum. There is ample evidence to suggest that they did hold this to be so, due to the inseparability of reason with eternal matter, but how can this be reconciled with language that speaks of a beginning for the work of the god(s) in actively shaping the universe? One could explain away all references to a beginning for the universe as referring to the beginning of each cycle, and thence positing multiple beginnings. But it could equally be held against them that there was one commencement to the world process, even if the cycles were conceived to extend forward infinitely in time.

One example of a disfavorable reception of Stoic Providence furnishes some evidence for the belief that there was a single beginning for an everlasting universe. Cicero mentions an Epicurean opponent of Stoicism, Velleius, who was positively disparaging of

[21]Ibid., 276.
[22]Ibid., 279.

Providence: “Listen to no ungrounded and fictitious doctrines… no prophetic hag like the Stoics’ Providence...”[23] The Epicureans generally frowned on philosophies that posited gods as caring, or concerned, for the world—it would be indicative of imperfection unfitting for any beings called gods. The only gods that could have any place for the Epicureans were indifferent, and Stoic Providence, being the good housekeeping of the rational animal of the world, would have been the epitome of everything against which the Epicureans opposed in this regard.

In his Epicurean zeal, Velleius attacks both the Platonists and Stoics wherewith he indicates that the Stoics problematically held an everlasting world process to have begun at some point:

> As for your [the Stoics’] providence, Lucilius, if it is the same thing as this, I repeat my earlier question about the labourers, the machines, and the entire planning and execution of the project. If it is something different, why did it make the world perishable, and not everlasting, as the Platonic god did? (4) A question for both of you [Plato and Stoics] is why the world-builders suddenly appeared on the scene, after sleeping for countless centuries.[24]

Velleius appears to have thought the Stoics’ Providence to be a project of world building, perhaps an ongoing project of creation, but that the work was initiated at some point in time, which he thinks is problematic on two counts: (1) it would posit the gods as having slept for centuries prior to the beginning—which Velleius holds there can be no time without the world—and (2) the world cannot be held imperishable and everlasting if it did have a beginning. This notion that the builders of the world began their work might not have been one that an average Stoic would have endorsed, for it depends on whether the

[23]Ibid., 60.
[24]Ibid., 61.

Stoics held that there was no beginning apart from the beginnings of universal cycles. If they did not, then it could not have been a beginning for matter—because nothing comes from nothing—but only for the processual transformation of matter according to the guidance of the rational world-order. Although the answer to this question is somewhat unclear—it could be that Velleius was confusing the Stoics with the Platonists—what can be gleaned from Velleius' critique is that Stoic Providence was a controversial topic and was tied to a number of important cosmological questions asked by other schools of thought.

One possible solution has been proposed by Long and Sedley: "the early Stoics did not maintain that the *present* world-order (*kosmos*) is ungenerated and indestructible."[25] It could be that the earlier Stoics held the world-order to be generated, and theoretically but not factually destructible, and perhaps Velleius was attacking views particular to a specific period or school of Stoicism. His point, that "there has been a certain eternity from infinite time past, which was not measured by any bounding of times, but whose extent can be understood, because it was unthinkable that there should have been some time at which there was no time" seems to indicate that at least Velleius thought the Stoics had no notion of infinite time past during which the world-order cycled.[26]

Another important cosmological question for the Stoics was whether there is a difference between Providence and fate. Calcidius indicates that this was a disputable question and that Chrysippus and Cleanthes took opposing sides. Chrysippus' position is

[25]Ibid., 278.
[26]Ibid., 61.

explained by the following:

> Thus some believe it to be an assumption that there is a difference between providence and fate, the reality being that they are one. For providence will be god's will, and furthermore his will is the series of causes. In virtue of being his will it is providence. In virtue of also being the series of causes it gets the additional name 'fate'. Consequently everything in accordance with fate is also the product of providence, and likewise everything in accordance with providence is the product of fate. That is Chrysippus' view.[27]

Chrysippus' view was evidently that there are no series of causes that occur apart from the will of god. Absolutely everything happens according to the will of god, and so any series of causes that one could point to and say "See that, that is fate," would also be able to be described as Providence. Providence and fate would be merely two different descriptions of the same thing, the world-order determined according to divine plan. Nevertheless, Cleanthes' disagreed with this understanding of Providence and fate. Calcidius describes his position as follows: "But others, like Cleanthes, while holding the dictates of providence to come about also by fate, allow things which come about by fate not to be the product of providence."[28] This is a somewhat strange notion, because it would allow some things to happen without Providence. By extrapolation, Providence would not be all encompassing of everything that happens in the world-order. Fate would merely be describing chains of causes, of which Providence would only be a species, but not all chains of causes could be called Providence. Some things would accordingly happen apart from the good housekeeping of the rational animal of the world.

However, such an extrapolation may be wrong. Perhaps Cleanthes' case was more

[27]Ibid., 331.
[28]Ibid.

subtle than this. He might not have been making a case that anything does happen apart from Providence, but rather he may have been simply trying to differentiate these two terms. He could have been making a logical point that Providence entails fate, but fate does not entail Providence *per se*. Certainly it is possible for an individual to be a fatalist and yet not have any commitment to the notion that the world has a particularly happy or rational fate. If something like this was Cleanthes' point, then he still could have held that everything does in fact happen according to Providence, although there would be nothing theoretically binding in the notion of fate which would entail its truth.

There did have to be some difficulty in the idea of Providence that was not quite so difficult as that of mere fate. Fate, as Chrysippus held it, was "a certain natural everlasting ordering of the whole: one set of things follows on and succeeds another, and the interconnexion is inviolable."[29] But Providence was supposed to be more than simply an inviolable interconnection of events in the universe. Providence was not simply order, but the idea that things were rationally ordered for a good end. One could always ask: "Is this really the case? Is the world-order truly rational and working out to the best end?" Gellius brings up just this problem for the Stoics. It is the classical problem of evil in the world, which has always been problematic for thinkers who have held a happy outlook on the world. Gellius poses the problem thus:

> Those who disbelieve that the world was created for the sake of god and man, and that human affairs are governed by providence, think that they are using a weighty argument when they say that if there were providence, there would be no evils. For nothing, they say is less compatible with providence than that in the world which is

[29]Ibid., 336.

alleged to have made for men there should be such a host of troubles and evils.[30]

The problem that evil poses for Providence shows that Providence was more than simply a cosmological speculation. Providence was also an ethical issue that was inextricably intertwined with the Stoics' positive outlook on the world. Whereas the idea of fate has ethical implications—such as regarding responsibility and freedom of action—fate itself was not the same bold claim that Providence made. If Providence held everything to be happening for the greater good of some divine plan, why are there so many bad things in the world? How can they be reconciled with a felicitous world order?

Gellius provides Chrysippus' response to this difficulty as it was contained in his no longer extant work, *On Providence*. He says:

> There is absolutely nothing more foolish than those who think that there could have been goods without the coexistence of evils. For since goods are opposite to evils, the two must necessarily exist in opposition to each other and supported by a kind of opposed interdependence… For how could there be perception of justice if there were no injustices? What else is justice, if not the removal of injustice? Likewise, what appreciation of courage could there be except through the contrast with cowardice? Of moderation, if not from immoderation? How, again, could there be prudence if there were not imprudence opposed to it? Why do the fools not similarly wish that there were truth without there being falsity?[31]

Chrysippus' reply foreshadows much later thinking on the problem of evil. He is one of the earliest to suggest that there could be no good without evil, and this idea has been carried far forward in time. Rather than holding that good and evil are two different things, he is proposing that evil does not really exist in a positive sense. Evil is only a privation of good, like cold is a privation of heat, and it would be absurd to imagine that there could be

[30]Ibid., 329.
[31]Ibid.

any good that does not stand in contrast to evil. The above explanation is strikingly similar to the well known "privation of evil" theodicies, which aim to show that good and evil are conceptually inseparable, functioning as contradictories rather than contraries: rather than two things existing, there is only one thing, good, and its privation that has no real existence in itself. Chrysippus' calling such an objection to Providence "foolish" and its objectors as "fools" could indicate that the problem of evil was particularly upsetting to the Stoics. Gellius reports that Chrysippus devoted a later portion of this same work to discussing whether illness was in accordance with nature, and so the problem of evil was something that had to be dealt with if the Stoics were to maintain their belief in Providence.

Among the most significant contributions to the conflict between Stoic Providence and the existence of evil is an essay written by the famous Roman philosopher Seneca to his friend Lucilius. From what Seneca says at the beginning of the essay, it appears that Lucilius was troubled about the compatibility of suffering and misfortune in the world and Providence's claim that the world order is governed by God for the best end. In short, Lucilius is troubled about the stark existence of evil—or more simply bad things—within the world, and how such a great good as the Providence of God—or even gods as variously understood—can still exist. In language reminiscent of the Argument from Evil and its accompanying theodicies, Seneca attempts to offer a reconciliation of these ideas from a genuinely Stoic perspective, saying, "it is the gods' cause I shall be pleading."[32] Seneca's approach to the topic of Providence shows that by his time Providence was far more

[32]John Davie, ed., *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

important than a cosmological speculation, but that it was indeed a powerful ethical theory in its own right.

Seneca begins by stating that he will not concern himself with demonstrating the existence of some power whose rational governance protects the world and confers order upon it. He holds that it is evident that such a power exists, that the stars are not mere products of chance, and that even what would have a contrary appearance in nature cannot exist apart from a fixed rational order. He first deals with nature and the appearance of disorder:

> this system is not produced by matter which moves randomly… Not even those natural events which appear capricious and undetermined—I mean showers of rain and clouds, the strokes of crashing thunderbolts and the fires that leap up from shattered mountain peaks, the tremors of the ground when it quakes, and the other motions caused around the earth by the violent element in nature—not even those occur without reason.[33]

Seneca is offering an explanation for chance in nature, and indirectly human misfortune —which is a species of chance—that turns it into something of an appearance. What may appear capricious or undetermined, from a human perspective, is really all part of the inescapable world-order determined by Providence. His astounding descriptions of nature, vivacious and powerful, help to dwarf the human perspective and show just how little humans are capable of fathoming the great design and complexity within the universe. Seneca's description of the "vastness of the ocean" and "chains of new islands springing up" is imaginatively breathtaking, leaving his reader in a state of awestruck contemplation of the natural world.[34] For the Stoic, contemplation of nature is contemplation of the

[33]John Davie, ed., *Seneca: Dialogues and Essays*, 3.
[34]Ibid., 4.

divine. One cannot argue that there is anything in the world that is not comprehended by a natural order determining everything from the highest heavens down to the smallest earthly details.

Seneca is offering a type of consolation to Lucilius—reassuring him that everything is okay—and he seems to be using two strategies that are illuminating about Providence. He is trying to show him that, (1) no matter what we may perceive as bad on a human level, it is nothing from a larger vantage point—the workings of Providence are macrocosmic in scope—and (2) he is showing how this narrow human perspective leaves out, not just the possibility, but the real fact of a good purpose in everything that happens: "I shall restore you to good relations with the gods, who are best to the best of men. For it is not Nature's way to let good ever do harm to good; between men and the gods exists a friendship sealed by virtue."[35] By saying that the gods "are best to the best of men," Seneca seems to be advocating a type of justice to everything that befalls humans—it is not that every person receives an equal share of everything, but only the best receive what is best, which is a restored friendship with the gods—this is interestingly a very common understanding of religion: a re-connection to the divine.

The friends of the gods are pupils and imitators; the gods are their benevolent teachers and trainers.[36] According to such an understanding of the relationship between gods and humans, one of absolute justice, even when it may look like a good person is suffering or over-laden with hardships, it is all for that individual's benefit. It is, so to speak, a lesson

[35]Ibid.
[36]Ibid., 4.

given to that person by the gods themselves and aimed at improving the individual. Justice consists in the appropriate difference of what is given to the good and the bad. Both receive the benefit of the gods, but they each require something different and suited to their characters. As such, not even bad people can escape the gods' justice that is worked through Providence, because the gods are able to bring forth Providence's good through even the most seemingly defective of individuals. Seneca provides an analogy to the difference in treatment given to one's own children as opposed to one's house-slaves:

> And so, when you see good men of whom the gods approve toiling and sweating, with a steep road to climb, and bad men, on the other hand, enjoying themselves, surrounded by pleasures, consider that our sons please us by their self-control, but our house-slaves by their free spirit, that we restrain the former by tighter discipline and nurture the latter's boldness of manner. It is no different with God, let me assure you: he does not pamper a good man like a favorite slave; he puts him to the test, hardens him, and makes him ready for his service.[37]

The implication is that there is something that is best for each person and it is not the same for all of them. The seeming different fortunes of humans are all aimed at a greater good from the perspective of Providence. Seneca follows up his analogy with a famous quote from Plato's *Apology*—"Nothing bad *can* happen to a good man"—which was a well favored saying among philosophers.[38] In the *Apology*, after Socrates was condemned to death, he made this famous statement, and it is one that characterizes the attitude of the philosopher. The philosopher is supposed to be a lover of wisdom, changing the world through reflection and self-improvement, and thus the good of the philosopher—that of being oneself a good and just individual—cannot be taken away by circumstance. Justice,

[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid.

like how Providence dispenses differently according to the needs of different individuals, is the individual's ordering of the different parts of the soul according to nature. What really matters is not many different parts or things, but what it all amounts to, to what extent it partakes of the good bestowed by Providence. Seneca says "it is not what you endure that matters, but how you endure it."[39] The Stoic philosopher, like most other philosophers, was primarily concerned with self-improvement, but for the Stoic this was the chief good.

Seneca makes the analogy of God to a father.[40] A father is not concerned with simply pleasing children, but with strengthening them and making them into virtuous individuals. Surely it would be to the detriment of a child to simply feed it candy whenever it wanted, although this may be temporarily pleasing to the child. Only through discretion, a proper ordering of things within time, can virtue be inculcated, and this involves the personal struggle of the pupil with difficult circumstances. The triumph of achieving some end cannot be separated from the difficulty involved getting there, and Seneca claims there would be no courage to enjoy if there were not fearful things like lions for youths—presumably in the arena—to withstand.[41] Seneca dismisses the crude notion that the gods must pander to the whims of humans if they are to have our best interest in mind; it is an utterly childish contention and beneath the Providence of God.

Seneca brings up the example of Cato, who took his own life in an act of patriotic suicide, to show just how grave and serious Providence can be. Without his grim death,

[39]Ibid., 5.
[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid.

plunging a sword into himself, he could not have become a hero: "his bravery was kept in check and summoned again so that it might reveal itself in a harder role."[42] The idea here, rather than aiming at showing that bad is only an appearance, is that some goods cannot be had without the things ordinarily perceived as bad. The bad is, in a way, instrumental to the attainment of some good. Cato rose to the occasion and met a grizzly fate head on, and it is by means of this evil that he became most "distinguished and memorable."[43] It should be noted that suicide is a controversial topic in Stoic studies. Suffice it to be said that the Stoics would not have advocated suicide on the grounds that "I can't take it anymore!" Rather, they would have held that the Stoic can endure anything that comes their way, including suicide.

Seneca also seems to be offering an explanation of bad things that transforms them into blessings in disguise: "I now make this point, that the things you call hardships, that you call adversities and detestable, actually are of benefit, first to the very persons they happen to, and secondly to the whole human race, which matters more to the gods than individuals do."[44] There is a good behind the bad things encountered in life, and this applies not just to the individual—as in Seneca's previous example of the individual being the pupil of the gods—but to the entirety of humanity, and thus to the world. Perhaps what he means by mentioning that the "whole human race" matters more than individuals is that Providence is not simply working out the best for individuals, like a courageous Cato, but also for the entirety of humanity.

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[42]Ibid., 6.
[43]Ibid.
[44]Ibid.

Seneca admits that his statement of bad things being good for the individual is probably the most difficult of his suggestions to swallow. Would Cato have done such a thing if he had not been faced with adversity? Admittedly no, but adversity itself is something that brings out the best in people. Seneca cites the words of a cynic friend of his, Demetrius, who said: "Nothing…seems to me more unhappy than the man who has no experience of adversity."[45] It is not simply that a Stoic is compelled to make the best of difficult circumstances, but that without difficult circumstances there could be no best for the individual: "Do not, I implore you, live in dread of what the immortal gods apply like spurs to our souls: disaster is the opportunity for true worth."[46] How could there be any strength, endurance, and triumph unless there was some real obstacle to be met with and overcome? There could not be for Seneca, as he aptly explains that a gladiator can take no pride in killing a weak opponent who willfully gives himself over to his sword.[47] Even Socrates' hemlock is transformed into "the elixir of immortality" and those who drink snow chilled goblets of wine "will measure out whatever they have drunk in vomit, tasting anew with twisted lips their own bile."[48]

Despite that Providence provides a justification for the world-order and for the Stoic God, it offered more than that. It actually gave the Stoic some imperative for his life, a goal to strive to attain. The goal is to live life in accordance with the natural order of the cosmos and give oneself over into the care of God:

> What is the duty of a good man? To offer himself to fate. It is no small consolation

[45]Ibid., 7.
[46]Ibid., 11.
[47]Ibid., 7, 10.
[48]Ibid., 9.

> that we are swept along together with the universe; whatever it is that has ordered us to live like this and to die like this, binds the gods as well by the same necessity. … the great creator and ruler of the universe himself wrote fate's decrees.[49]

For the trusting Stoic, there could be no bad that happens to a just individual. No matter what happens, so long as the Stoic remained true to himself and did not fight against the fate written for him by God, everything would happen just as it should. From Seneca's writings, it can be seen that Providence is far more than simply a cosmological speculation. It has become universal justice and the foundation for all Stoic value theory. The Stoic conception of the natural world, their belief in an inescapable dispensation of justice, and the pursuit of living a life in accordance with nature are all made one through Stoic Providence.

In conclusion, this paper has found that Stoic Providence is first mentioned in Diogenes' account of Zeno among a number of questions relating purely to cosmology. Providence could be most literally understood as the good housekeeping of the rational animal of the world. The rational agency through which this was accomplished was conceived differently by different Stoics: some held that it was imminent in everything equally and others that it was dispersed more or less in different parts. Providence was believed by some to entail the truth of fate and thereby divination, although this was not universally accepted. God, soul, and matter—all of which were conceived as bodies—were necessary for Providence: God was the active principle shaping passive matter, and reason —pertaining to part of the soul—was like a blueprint or plan behind the cyclical world process, leading to a great conflagration through which the cycle perpetuated itself. It is

[49]Ibid., 14.

likely that the Stoics held this process to have continued from an infinite time; however, there is some evidence to suggest that some may have thought there was a prior time when the gods were asleep—a notion found unappealing by the critic of the Stoics, Velleius. Some Stoics, like Chrysippus, maintained that all things that happen by fate are the product of Providence, while others, like Cleanthes, held that not everything that happens by fate happens by Providence. The problem of evil was considered to be an issue worth discussing, because it provided a challenge to Providence's claim that the universe is ordered according to a happy and rational design. This issue was given considerable discussion by Seneca and shows at last the full ethical implications for Stoic Providence: all justice and value theory depends upon it. Through Providence Stoic cosmology and ethics become one.

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