IN ACCORDANCE WITH NATURE
AN INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY B. SADLER

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In this interview, we discuss the history of Stoicism, the Stoics conception of nature, as well as what the Stoics meant with “living in accordance with nature”, and more.

Who were the Stoics?

The Stoics were one of the major schools of philosophy in the Ancient western world. They emerged around 300 BC from an intellectual context centered around Athens that already included several other significant schools, each with their own distinctive approaches, their own developing bodies of literature, and their own scholars and leadership—the Academy established by Plato, the Lyceum established by Aristotle, the Garden established by Epicurus. There were also several other schools active in Greece, which we now typically call “minor Socratic”—the earlier hedonists in Aristippus’ Cyrenaic school, the dialecticians in Euclides’ Megarian school, and the much looser Cynic school founded by Antisthenes.

The founder of the Stoic school, Zeno, was originally a merchant whose ship was wrecked carrying a precious commodity, purple dye, near Athens. According to the stories told about him, his spur to studying philosophy was reading through Xenophon’s accounts of his teacher, Socrates, and a desire to study with someone like Socrates, at a bookseller in Athens. The bookseller pointed out Crates the Cynic to him, and Zeno studied with Crates for a number of years, “studying” in this case meaning not just learning from him intellectually but also practicing the Cynic way of life. Zeno also studied with representatives of the Academy and the Megarian schools, and drew elements from each of those schools into a new synthesis. He began teaching at the Stoa Poikilē (the painted porch), and eventually he and his followers became known as the “people of the Stoa”.

The Stoic school grew under a succession of scholarchs (leaders of the school), and expanded not only its geographical scope but also its body of doctrine. Some of the expansion occurred through responding to arguments and criticisms made by rival schools that needed to be addressed. Part of this development was due to the need to respond to arguments and criticisms made by rival schools of thought, as well as a gradual adaptation of Stoic ideas, insights and practices in response to new experiences, challenges and situations. Stoicism was not—contrary to some past and present portrayals of it—the main philosophy of the upper class of the Roman republic and empire. In fact, Stoics
sometimes found themselves exiled or even executed for taking stances critical of political leaders. But for those who viewed philosophy as valuable, it was one of the main options available throughout the Roman Empire and even beyond.

While Stoicism developed a sophisticated and complex body of doctrine in the disciplines which they called “Logic” (which would include epistemology) and “Physics” (extending to philosophy of religion, cosmology, and psychology), the third main division of philosophy, Ethics, was of major importance as well. Given that the existing available literature of Stoicism tends to focus on topics in this area, it is not surprising that interpreters and followers of Stoicism past ancient times, down to the present, typically focus on the practical side of Stoicism. It does indeed provide a “philosophy as a way of life”, a comprehensive, systematic, developmental philosophical perspective intended to be practiced, lived out, and applied.

The Stoics thought that the telos, or the end or purpose, of man was to live in accordance with nature. What did they mean by ‘nature’, and what would living according to nature entail?

This appears to be an important early doctrine that received quite a bit of reinterpretation, expansion, and application over the Stoic school’s centuries of development. And it does make for quite a few confusions and controversies for contemporary audiences. There are some modern Stoics who would like to deal with this by simply reducing living in accordance with nature to something like “living virtuously” or “living rationally”. It should be noted that there’s some support for that in Aurius Didymus’ Epitome of Stoic Ethics. Massimo Pigliucci takes a position like this in his How to Be A Stoic. There are others who think that the phrase “in accordance with nature” is unhelpful and ideally should be dispensed with. In his A New Stoicism, Lawrence Becker, for example, writes that “[S]toic ethics would probably be better off without its ‘follow nature’ slogan” (46), and proposes “follow the facts” as a substitute.

One significant problem for contemporary readers of the Stoics when it comes to this relation to “nature”, is the assumption that the ancient writers had in mind the same sorts of things that we mean when we say “nature”. So where people in the present might be tempted to excuse vicious behavior by saying “Oh well, that’s just human nature”, Stoics would respond by pointing out that vicious action might be in accordance with our animality, but not with our distinctive human nature. In fact, Epictetus directly connects different modes of vicious behavior with different kinds of animality - aggressive people are like predators, and libidinous or gluttonous people are like sheep. For Stoics, when it comes to humans, “nature” doesn’t mean how people generally act, but instead refers to how humans ought to act, a fully developed human nature (or at least one on the way).

There’s also a temptation on some people’s part to try to interpret Stoicism through lenses furnished by rather speculative “sciences” of evolutionary biology or psychology, which make some rather sweeping and dogmatic claims about what human nature consists in. In my view, when we bring together the relevant passages from Stoic literature about “in accordance with nature”, being “in harmony with nature”, “participating in nature”, or “following nature” (as well as those bearing on their opposites), what we have is a rich, robust, and complex notion. This is an idea that we ought to resist attempting to reduce to something simpler. Instead, we ought to embrace and delve into this complexity. I won’t try to provide anything like a complete overview of that here (in fact, I think the doctrine deserves unpacking in a short book), but I will point out that Stoic discussions of the notion include those that frame it in terms of the universe and physical processes, distinctively human nature, lack of contradictions or conflicts within the person, duties and relations, managing the emotions, using externals and impressions rightly, and even (in the case of Epictetus) what we do with our faculty of choice (the prohairesis).

There are also some characterizations of things as being “in accordance with nature” or not that seem to be rather culturally specific, which we probably would not want to uncritically accept into modern Stoicism. Musonius Rufus’ argument that farming is the occupation most in accordance with nature is a prime example, as is Epictetus’ insistence on gender roles rigidly demarcated by clothing and appearance.

Sometimes, the Stoics seem to almost equate nature and God. Is nature just another word for God?

That is a good question, and one to which I suspect one might get different answers from different Stoics, particularly in the present, where modern Stoics can be all over the map, religiously speaking. There are expli-
citly and avowedly atheist modern Stoics who understandably reject any of the classical Stoic “God-talk”. This means that not only do they think that there is no God or gods providentially ordering the natural world but also that they would reject any divinizing of nature itself. There are also other modern Stoics who in one way or another synthesize what they take from classic Stoicism with one of the world religions, so you can find for instance people who identify as Christian Stoics, Jewish Stoics, and Buddhist Stoics. They too will typically not view nature as itself God, either because they bring in a conception of creation and ordering of the natural world by God, or because they view nature as a set of processes even divine beings would be caught up within. Then there are the “traditional Stoics” who think that there are key doctrines of classic Stoicism, and, if one rejects them one cannot really call oneself a “Stoic”. But even for them, nature won’t be simply equivalent with God.

If we restrict ourselves to consideration of the views of classical Stoics, it seems that nature and God, while certainly connected, are not precisely the same thing. We have to be a bit careful in pronouncing it in a too confident, let alone authoritative, manner about these matters, given that most of the Stoic literature that exists has been lost. Still, we do have the writings of the “big three” (Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius) and some substantive discussions of Stoic doctrine in the works of Cicero, Diogenes Laërtius, and Arius Didymus (among other authors). Sometimes Stoicism has been interpreted on this matter as if it is a sort of pantheism, when it is better described as a version of panentheism. Pantheism is a view that holds that everything is in some sense God, that there is an identity between the universe—or “nature”—and the divine. Panentheism quite literally means “God being in the whole or totality of things”, so that while God would be closely interconnected with nature, God would not simply be identical with nature.

Consider how Epictetus, whose work and thought is arguably the most substantively religious of the Stoics whose works we possess, speaks about God. We are advised to accept how things in the natural world happen and work, since that is the will of God. There is a robust providential ordering of events, he tells us. But as human beings, we are not just modes of the divinity. Instead, what makes human beings special as rational beings is that we carry around within us a certain portion of the divinity. That’s one reason precisely why Epictetus thinks we need to treat other human beings well. So, not every part or order of the natural world has God within it in the same manner. Seneca speaks in Letter 65 of God (or productive reason, ratio faciens) as the main and primary cause of the world and the things of the world. One might go on and reference additional discussions from these and other authors, to reinforce this point. God and nature are closely connected for the Stoics, but they are not just the same thing.

Nietzsche said a few disparaging things about the Stoics, I am thinking especially about a section from Beyond Good and Evil. There he claims that nature is “[...] boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain” and that living means “[...] just endeavouring to be otherwise than this Nature? Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different?” (Section 1.9). Living in accordance with nature, therefore, seems to be a contradiction in terms. Is he on to something? The simple answer is that Nietzsche and the Stoics have two quite different and complex ideas of what “nature” is. You might say that these do overlap at some places, but my impression is that Nietzsche is in some respects talking past the Stoics. I also think that he knows that he is doing so, since he studied ancient literature extensively.

The criticism that the Stoics are either committing to something rather vacuous, but pretending that they are not — or that they are doing so without realizing it, isn’t a radically new view. Hegel developed a more or less similar criticism at greater length in his Phenomenology of Spirit, accusing the Stoics of retreating from the messy real world into an assertion about being in contact with the true, the good, and the rational. Nietzsche is doing the same thing with nature and life.

A more serious complaint made in Nietzsche’s passage in Beyond Good and Evil, is that the Stoics are trying to impose a false framework onto nature itself, “[...] creat[ing] a world in its own image” (2008, 11). This would involve a double mistake or failure on their part. On the one hand, they would be missing out on the reality or actuality of nature, the extravagance without limit Nietzsche references here, driven everywhere by will(s)-to-power. Instead, they would believe in a
How can the Stoics maintain both freedom and determinism?

That is quite a tough one to explain in ways that are entirely satisfactory, I’ve found. It is clear that the Stoics are what we nowadays call “compatibilists”. That is, they accept the basic claims of the “determinist” side, namely that all events are determined by something. This would include human thoughts, feelings, desires, volitions, motivations, choices, and actions, and the main way Stoics talk about this determination is that all of these have prior “causes”. The classic Stoics who do believe in the existence of gods (and of God or Zeus) also frame this in terms of divine foreknowledge, i.e. that God or the gods know what will happen. These divine beings know the truth of propositions about future events. And at the same time, the Stoics want to say that human beings have some degree of freedom of choice, an assertion that in philosophy, and on its own, we typically call “libertarianism”. That’s what makes them “compatibilists”, thinking that causal determinism can be, and is, compatible with freedom of choice.

Now the most interesting thing with compatibilists is the mechanics of their account. How precisely are they able to bring these two seeming realities - causal determinism and free choice—together in ways that respect both? I have to say myself that I don’t really find some of the standard explanations or analogues provided by the Stoics all that convincing on their own. Chrysippus’ use of the cylinder rolling down a slope as an analogy for the human mind, where the push that starts it rolling is not the real cause why it rolls, since that lies in the very nature of the cylinder, but really just the occasion or impetus that gets it doing what it is already ready to do, doesn’t seem to really explain all that much when it comes to human volitions. The distinctions Stoics make between perfect or principal causes and auxiliary or proximate causes, along with further qualifications of causes as antecedent or “containing”, don’t seem to get us further than saying that while the acting or willing person is “caused” in some ways, what really produces their volitions or actions is their own condition or themselves. What we want more clarification about, I think, is: what about them, or what in them?

Here is where I think that Epictetus’ distinctive focus on prohairesis provides us with an advance on other Stoic thinkers and accounts that we have available. In English, this term gets translated as “faculty of choice”, “will”, or “moral purpose”. Without going into too much detail here, I will simply remark that the prohairesis as a faculty of the human being is either the same as (though in some respects distinguishable from) what the Stoics call the “rational faculty” or the “ruling faculty”. Like both of those, it is also reflexive, that is, it can take positions upon and determine itself. Prohairesis always operates within a complex causal context, and can—if we’re not careful - allow itself to be determined by all sorts of causes, for example automatic lines of thinking consolidated into habits and provoked by impressions or appearances (phantasia). But this faculty is also free, if it chooses to be.

I personally think that the Stoic position can be best understood as something like what 20th century thinkers like Maurice Blondel in his Action (1893), or Jean-Paul Sartre in Being and Nothingness (1943),
work out when it comes to human freedom, action, and the matrix of causal determinism. You might think of the human being, when they are not merely acting, willing, and thinking more or less automatically, as employing the scope of freedom they possess, emerging out of that deterministic matrix by the use of that freedom in ways that still maintain an attachment and motivation by that determinism, acting more or less freely, and then being brought back into that matrix again.

NOTES
1 Unfortunately, much of the Stoic writings has been lost.
2 τέλος ἐπε τὸ ὁμολογουμένως τῇ φύσει ζῆν (DL 7.87)
3 Full quote: You desire to LIVE “according to Nature”? Oh, you noble Stoics, what fraud of words! Imagine to yourselves a being like Nature, boundlessly extravagant, boundlessly indifferent, without purpose or consideration, without pity or justice, at once fruitful and barren and uncertain: imagine to yourselves INDIFFERENCE as a power—how COULD you live in accordance with such indifference? To live—is not that just endeavouring to be otherwise than this Nature? Is not living valuing, preferring, being unjust, being limited, endeavouring to be different? And granted that your imperative, “living according to Nature,” means actually the same as “living according to life”—how could you do DIFFERENTLY? Why should you make a principle out of what you yourselves are, and must be? In reality, however, it is quite otherwise with you: while you pretend to read with rapture the canon of your law in Nature, you want something quite the contrary, you extraordinary stage-players and self-deluders! In your pride you wish to dictate your morals and ideals to Nature, to Nature herself, and to incorporate them therein; you insist that it shall be Nature “according to the Stoa,” and would like everything to be made after your own image, as a vast, eternal glorification and generalisation of Stoicism! With all your love for truth, you have forced yourselves so long, so persistently, and with such hypnotic rigidity to see Nature FALSELY, that is to say, Stoically, that you are no longer able to see it otherwise—and to crown all, some unfathomable superciliousness gives you the Bedlamite hope that BECAUSE you are able to tyrannize over yourselves—Stoicism is self-tyranny—Nature will also allow herself to be tyrannized over: is not the Stoic a PART of Nature?... But this is an old and everlasting story: what happened in old times with the Stoics still happens today, as soon as ever a philosophy begins to believe in itself. It always creates the world in its own image; it cannot do otherwise; philosophy is this tyrannical impulse itself, the most spiritual Will to Power, the will to “creation of the world,” the will to the causa prima.

LITERATURE