

# ETERNAL QUESTIONS

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## The Right to Exist

*Arguments for the founding of a Stoic monastery*

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### Introduction

Before we immerse ourselves in “eternal questions,” we must address a couple of matters that are more temporal. First, do Stoics even have a right to found a monastery? Yes. The Black Eagle Stoic Monastery was founded in April of 2019 to reclaim our ancient heritage. According to Maxwell Stanisforth, an Oxford professor who became a parish priest, “In the Stoic vocabulary one who went into retreat was an ‘anchorite’; one who practiced self-discipline was an ‘ascetic’; those who lived apart from their fellows were ‘monachi’; and the place of their retreat was a ‘monasterium’.”<sup>1</sup>

But what about metaphysics? This is a journal of metaphysics; it says so right in the banner above. “Is there a Stoic metaphysics? The answer obviously depends on what we mean by metaphysics....[in] one sense the Stoics have no metaphysics....In another sense, however, one might suggest that the Stoics had not only one but two ‘metaphysics’. One is merely a *part* of physics; the other is a study over and above their standard tripartition of philosophy.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stanisforth's introduction to Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (Penguin Classics, 1964, p. 26).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Brunschwig (late Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Paris), “Stoic Metaphysics,” in the *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge, 2003, p. 206).

Nevertheless, we still have to answer a claim made by Professor Ludwig Edelstein that “[Stoic philosophy] does not satisfy what Kant called the eternal metaphysical need of man.”<sup>3</sup> The monachi of the monastery are challenging that claim in our studies, discussions, practices, and writings. The EQ journal is only one example of our investigation of Stoic metaphysics.

And we’re not alone. All of the following arguments are made by knowledgeable men we can respect. Their words suggest again and again that Stoics must have an answer to Edelstein’s denial that Stoics satisfy our eternal metaphysical need. And we do. Certainly there are more arguments than these that could be made, but there comes a time when to belabor a point makes one sound defensive or annoyed. We won’t do that.

To save time and space the following authors will mostly speak for themselves. Occasionally I will make a comment about what was said, usually quite brief, which will be written in [blue font](#). We will begin with an essential passage from Keimpe Algra, a Dutch professor of Ancient and Medieval philosophy at Utrecht University. Professor Algra begins his essay with a passage that describes our foundational belief about God.

#### KEIMPE ALGRA

“The object of Stoic theology was the governing principle of the cosmos, insofar as this could also be labeled ‘god’. The Stoics accordingly regarded theology as part of physics, more specifically as that part which does not focus on the details and the purely physical aspects of cosmic processes, but rather on their overall coherence, teleology, and providential design, as well as on the question of how this cosmic theology relates to popular forms of belief and worship.”<sup>4</sup>

#### HERACLITUS (Burnet fragments)

And now that we have created a conceptual foundation, the monastery can exist. If we accept and appreciate the value of the quotations presented so far, then we can proceed by going back to the beginning. The Stoics’ place in the world of metaphysics begins 2500 years ago with Heraclitus, the Obscure One, an amazing philosopher who some call the first western mystic and Stoics call their cosmologist.

“Mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals, the one living the others’ death and dying the others’ life (65)....You will not find the boundaries of soul by traveling in any direction, so deep is the measure of it (69).... And it is the same  
<sup>3</sup> *The meaning of Stoicism*, Martin Classical Lectures, Oberlin College (Harvard, 1966, p. 97)  
<sup>4</sup> “Stoic Theology,” in the *Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (Cambridge, 2003, p. 153)

thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former (74).... There awaits men when they die such things as they look not for nor dream of (113)."

We study Heraclitus at the monastery.

#### SOCRATES (from Plato's *Apology*)

"You have often heard me speak of an oracle or sign which comes to me, and is the divinity which Meletus ridicules in the indictment. This sign I have had ever since I was a child. The sign is a voice which comes to me and always forbids me to do something which I am going to do, but never commands me to do anything, and this is what stands in the way of my being a politician."

There is so much that can be said about Socrates' well-known trances, ecstasies, and conversations with his daimon that before one approaches this material one must check one's own beliefs. If the student of Socrates is an atheist, then they will lean toward the reductionist opinion that he suffered from some physical ailment, such as temporal lobe epilepsy. But for those who treasure an open mind much more can be learned.

It's easy to dismiss all mystical or paranormal experiences that have frequented every human culture for thousands of years if one describes "those people" as either insane or medically impaired.

#### SENECA (Letter XXXIII, 11)

"Truth will never be discovered if we are content with discoveries that have already been made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that is a shortcut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Those who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all; it has not yet been monopolized. And, there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover."

This is one of my favorite passages written by any of the ancients. It is as valid today as it will be in another 2,000 years.

## PLUTARCH

Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus was born 46 CE in Chaeronea, Greece, and died after 119 CE in Delphi. "Plutarch was a Greek Middle Platonist philosopher, historian, biographer, essayist, and priest at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi. He is known primarily for his *Parallel Lives*, a series of biographies of illustrious Greeks and Romans, and *Moralia*, a collection of essays and speeches (Wikipedia)."

"Athletes who have given up training because of age are not altogether abandoned by the spirit of competitiveness and concern for the body; they enjoy seeing others training, they encourage them and run beside them. [593E] So those who have retired from the contests of life and, because of the excellence of their soul, have become *daimones*, do not altogether spurn the affairs, arguments, and enthusiasms of this world, but feel well-disposed to those in training for the same goal, and encourage and urge them on in their quest for virtue, when they see that their striving has brought them within touching distance of their hopes." <sup>5</sup>

[Do we become daimones when we have achieved excellence of soul?](#)

## DIOGENES LAERTIUS

"And they [the Stoics] hold that there are daemons (*daimones*) who are in sympathy with mankind and watch over human affairs." *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. II, book VII, 151—Zeno (Harvard, 1991)

[The Greek daimon, the same \*something\* who spoke to Socrates, was translated to daemon in Latin, then twisted when translated to demon by the Christians to make pagan metaphysics frightening and evil.](#)

## WILLIAM JAMES (1842-1910)

"William James is considered by many to be the most insightful and stimulating of American philosophers, as well as the second of the three great pragmatists (the middle link between Charles Sanders Peirce and John Dewey). As a professor of psychology and of philosophy at Harvard University, he became the most famous living American psychologist and later the most famous living American philosopher of his time (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)."

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<sup>5</sup> *On the daimonion of Socrates: Human liberation, divine guidance and philosophy*, edited by Heinz-Günther Nesselrath (Mohr Siebeck Publishing—open access, 2010)

"The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again is the very root of judgment, character and will. No one is *compus sui* (master of one's self) if he have it not. An education which would improve this faculty would be education par excellence."<sup>6</sup>

I totally agree, and that's what we are doing at the monastery.

#### WILLIAM JAMES, AGAIN

The following are a few of my favorite passages in "The Will to Believe."<sup>7</sup> After it's publication, James confided that it should have been entitled, "The *Right* to Believe." This essay has been for me personally one of the most valuable papers I have ever read.

"... by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can ... [It is] the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity ... a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be ....

"in *abstracto* ... we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. In *concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.

"When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait—acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were not true—till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough—this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave."

<sup>6</sup> *Psychology: Briefer Course* (Harper Touchstone, 1961)

<sup>7</sup> An Address to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. Published in the *New World*, June, 1896.

## Conclusion

Please meditate on the words you have just read. If you are willing to take responsibility for the evolution of your soul, then join us at the monastery. If you often feel the eternal metaphysical need of our kind, then you may become one of us. If every time you see an image of a monk and it causes you stop and wonder, then wonder no longer. With minimal effort you may become a friend of the monastery (*amicus monasterii*). With considerable effort you may become a regular member of the monachi.

Welcome home.

Letters to the Editor should be sent with the writer's name via email to First Monk, Brother Flavius at [flavius@stoicmonastery.com](mailto:flavius@stoicmonastery.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity and may be published in any medium.

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