

Dear Reader,

This issue's topic is one that explains:

1. The dominant philosophy of the modern world
2. The reason why dealing with climate warming has been ineffective.
3. Roman Catholic church officials' disastrous teaching on birth control.

I have introduced the topic in this way so that you will not immediately stop reading. It is a topic you probably have never given any thought to and a topic you likely assume is of no interest to you. I must finally admit that the topic of this issue is: Stoicism.

For most people their knowledge of Stoicism is by way of the adjective "stoic" or "stoical." Its usual meaning is to describe someone who shows no feelings, especially in the face of some terrible event. That's an accurate meaning about the practice of Stoicism. But it is a minor characteristic of a way of thinking that has been a major influence on all western history.

Stoicism was one of many schools of philosophy that arose in ancient Greece. It is not featured as much in literature as is Platonism or Aristotelianism. But while these great systems of thought did have profound influence on the way we think, they were somewhat lacking in instruction for the ordinary man and woman. The Stoics turned their attention to a way of living and especially how one should face suffering and death. The Stoics were successful in moving from a Greek to a Roman culture. While the Romans are not known for their philosophy, many of the greatest Stoic philosophers were Romans, including Cicero, Marcus Aurelius and Seneca.

For the Stoics, life is ruled by Nature, the mother of us all. Human beings have to learn obedience to Nature. Nature is never wrong. In a famous metaphor by the founder of Stoicism, man is likened to a dog trotting alongside a cart; the dog can learn to run next to the cart, and all will be well. Or the dog can dig in its heels and resist the movement of the cart, but it will be dragged along. Either way nature wins, as the death of every man proves.

Stoicism ran its course in the early centuries of the Common Era, being absorbed in part by Christianity. When Stoicism reappeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had one change: now the dog had become big and strong; it would give directions to the cart. Nature was still the ultimate winner (out to kill us all) but "man" was discovering her "laws" and some day might even overcome death.

## IS NATURE OUR MOTHER?

Gabriel Moran

Nature was invented by Greek thinkers before the era of Plato and Aristotle. The first comprehensive set of meanings of “nature” is in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. He listed six meanings of the word and then, as was his custom, he tried to fashion his own meaning that would take account of these diverse meanings. For Aristotle, nature primarily means the “life principle,” the way to explain the movement of living things. Strangely, Aristotle did not include on his list the meaning of “nature” which eventually became the dominant meaning, namely, nature as an abstract name for the totality of things. That meaning existed by Aristotle’s time and was already personalized as mother nature.

“Nature” commonly retained these two meanings – the inner principle of a living thing and the cosmos or nature as our mother. These two meanings existed at the beginning of the Common Era and are still with us. Other subsidiary meanings have accompanied these two meanings. Two great scholars in the 1930s, Franz Boas and Arthur Lovejoy, claimed to find 66 meanings of “nature” and concluded that “nature” is the most equivocal word in the English language. We are no better off today than we were in the 1930s. People confidently invoke “nature” as if there were no ambiguity in the word.

Stoicism played a crucial role in making prominent the idea of nature as the cosmos of living things. Stoicism became especially important by intersecting with Jewish religion in the formation of Christianity. Actually, there was no Jewish “religion” until Jewish tradition met Stoicism because the word religion was coined by the Stoics. Even then, Jewish did not become the name of “a religion” but instead Jews were a people who practiced “religion.” The distinction between philosophy and religion did not exist, but since the word religion from the first to the sixteenth centuries meant a set of practices, “religion” could fit neatly within philosophy.

Cicero said that we Romans are not good at many things but when it comes to religion, we are the world’s experts. Stoicism and the Christian movement were in direct competition; each of them offered a view of the universe as well as practices for daily living. The Christians were impressed by the “pious” lives of the Stoics, but they could not accept the cosmic view of Mother Nature as the source of life. The Christians insisted on a Father God who is Creator of the universe.

Christianity won the competition, perhaps because of its more hopeful view of death. But as often happens in such competitions the winner absorbed much of the language of the loser. Besides the term religion, Stoicism provided much of the language of Christian morality, starting with the words, morality and virtue. “Sacrament” went from a Roman military oath to a name for the central practices of Christian piety.

The most important term that Christianity absorbed from Stoicism was “nature.” In Stoicism the idea that Nature governs human life meant that the right thing to do was to

follow nature's rules. The idea of "natural law" is often attributed to Aristotle but the words are Cicero's. Cicero's three kinds of law (civil, natural, and the law of nations) were taken over by Christian thinkers. Augustine considered Cicero his great teacher.

The danger in Christians taking over Cicero's meaning of "natural law" is that it reflected the Stoic injunction for humans to obey nature as their ultimate guide. The ambiguity for Christians in the idea of natural law was whether humans are subject to a cosmic nature or whether humans are called to be true to their own human-nature. The possibility of affirming the latter was facilitated by the Christian invention of "person" which has no equivalent in ancient Greek thought. But not until Thomas Aquinas was the potential for "person" realized; he called person the "noblest thing in nature" and said that nothing is greater than person in the universe.

Thomas Aquinas accepted the term natural law but he did interesting things with it. He said it was manifest in the human mind as a set of principles. To apply to any situation, we need what he calls "determinations," particular details of the situation. It is more accurate to say that Thomas Aquinas does not have a "natural law" but instead "natural laws,": a law that applies to all natures, a law for nonhuman animals, and a law for human-natures. In order to understand what *human-nature* requires, one has to listen to human testimony and study history. The natural law for humans is personal law which includes the inventiveness and developments of human history. Personal law as the basis of morality required education and an institution in which officials respected personal freedom rather than keeping order through obedience and a demand for loyalty.

When modern science began, it was not opposed by Christian leaders. The ambiguous word nature was the bridge between Christianity and the new sciences. But the "nature" of modern science was the Stoic meaning of the cosmos.

What the mathematical sciences discovered could have been called "natural laws" but the term "laws of nature" was preferred. Nature was in charge, but the human mind was capable of discovering the ways of nature. By knowing these laws, human beings could have a longer and more comfortable life, and a life of creativity. The term "technology," meaning the logic of art, was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Human nature lives by artifice.

Modern science had a near contradiction in which it could speak of nature as the cosmos in which "man" is a speck of matter, but it also spoke of nature as what is to be subdued by "man" using his mind and his newly created machines. Man "puts Nature to the rack and demands answer." This arrogance of scientific man seemed justified by the inventions and the transforming of life for the better.

The coining of the word "ecology" at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the signal that there was a down side to the apparent progress of the humans. Resources for other living natures had been neglected in the rush for human progress. Scientists recognized that a change of attitude was needed; they began trying to convey this to the general public in the 1970s with limited success.

People originally understood the environmental movement to be about “nature” which was thought to draw attention away from human needs. It was also not clear how humans could do any serious damage to nature. Since the 17<sup>th</sup> century people had been taught that Nature is the great controlling force; humans are an insignificant speck of matter. Now nature was in trouble and scientists have not known how to convince people that they must change their behavior. What they need is the contrasting meaning of nature, as in “human-nature” that has to be brought back to center stage. The environmental movement is not about what humans are doing to nature but what human-nature is doing to itself and its surroundings, that is, (human) environment.

The scientific data on climate change is, according to scientists, overwhelming. But a part of the public is unconvinced, and more data will never prove the case to them. Scientists are not good at the apocalyptic game. That is where Christianity is superior to Stoicism and to modern science. Christianity, or some kind of religious attitude, is needed to supplement scientific data. The main reason for limiting carbon use is not respect for nature but to protect the water, air and land that one’s children and grandchildren need.

Roman Catholic officials endlessly invoke “natural law” without seeming to know what they are talking about. Almost always when natural law is brought up, they are talking about sex. Why not the environment, execution of prisoners, the use of drones, the pollution of rivers, the separation of children from their parents – all these actions by human beings might be seen as violations of what is natural.

When natural law is used by church officials for judging sexual practices, the rule is that nature dictates the purpose of sex, namely, the reproduction of the species. But humans throughout history have found a variety of other meanings for human sexuality. Ask any teenager. The most obvious meaning is love and companionship. The Catholic Church has assumed that this aspect of sexuality is for parental care of the children. Anyone can agree that children do need that stability. But it is just as apparent that love and companionship are valuable in themselves.

The words nature and natural are not in the Hebrew Bible or the Gospels. Paul practically invented the word unnatural for sex between men. He had neither the idea nor the word homosexuality. This sexual expression was different from what he assumed is the normal or natural way of things. He could not have known that same sex love is quite natural for a significant percentage of human-natures. I find it impossible to imagine what Paul would think of homosexuality if he were alive today. I am quite confident that Thomas Aquinas would not have any moral problem with it.

It is well known that the Catholic Church condemns “artificial” birth control. The prohibition denies that personal morality includes the use of artifice in every aspect of life. The principle propounded by Pope Pius XI in 1930 and reaffirmed by Pope Paul VI in 1968 that every human sexual act is directed to procreation is the natural law that Thomas Aquinas said applies to animals other than humans. The human natural law is one of delighting in the variety and pleasure of artistic, technological and sexual practices.

## MEDITATIONS

By Marcus Aurelius

How quickly all things disappear, in the universe the bodies themselves, but in time the remembrance of them; what is the nature of all sensible things, and particularly those which attract with the bait of pleasure or terrify by pain, or are noised abroad by vapory fame; how worthless, and contemptible, and sordid, and perishable, and dead they are – all this it is the part of the intellectual faculty to observe.

To observe who these are whose opinions and voices give reputation; what death is, and the fact that, if a man looks at it in itself, and by the abstractive power of reflection resolves into their parts all the things which present themselves to the imagination in it, he will then consider it to be nothing else than an operation of nature; and if anyone is afraid of an operation of nature, he is a child. This, however, is not only an operation of nature, but it is also a thing which conduces to the purposes of nature. To observe too how man comes near to the deity, and by what part of him, and when this part of man is so disposed.

Nothing is more wretched than a man who traverses everything in a round, and pries into the things beneath the earth, as the poet says, and seeks by conjecture what is in the minds of his neighbors, without perceiving that it is sufficient to attend to the daemon within him, and to reverence it sincerely. And reverence of the daemon consists in keeping it pure from passion and thoughtlessness, and dissatisfaction with what comes from gods and men.

For the things from the gods merit veneration for their excellence; and the things from men should be dear to us by reason of kinship; and sometimes even, in a manner, they move our pity by reason of men's ignorance of good and bad; this defect being not less than that which deprives us of the power of distinguishing things that are white and black.

Though thou shouldst be going to live three thousand years, and as many times ten thousand years, still remember that no man loses any other life than this which he now lives, nor lives any other than this which he now loses. The longest and shortest are thus brought to the same. For the present is the same to all, though that which perishes is not the same; and so that which is lost appears to be a mere moment. For a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for that which a man has not, how can anyone take this from him?

These two things then thou must bear in mind; the one, that all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle, and that it makes no difference whether a man shall see the same things during a hundred years or two hundred, or an infinite time; and the second, that the longest liver and he who will die soonest lose just the same. For the present is the only thing of which a man can be deprived, if it is true that this is the only thing which he has, and that a man cannot lose a thing if he has it not.

The soul of man does violence to itself, first of all, when it becomes an abscess and, as it were, a tumor on the universe. For to be vexed at anything which happens is a separation of ourselves from nature, in some part of which the natures of all other things are contained. In the next place, the soul does violence to itself when it turns away from any man, or even moves towards him with the intention of injuring, such as are the souls of those who are angry.

In the third place, the soul does violence to itself when it is overpowered by pleasure or by pain. Fourthly, when it plays a part, and does or says anything insincerely and untruly. Fifthly, when it allows any act of its own and any movement to be without an aim, and does anything thoughtlessly and without considering what it is, it being right that even the smallest things be done with reference to an end; and the end of rational animals is to follow reason and the law of the polity.

Of human life the time is a point, and the substance is in a flux, and the perception dull, and the composition of the whole body subject to putrefaction, and the soul a whirl, and fortune hard to divine, and fame a thing devoid of judgement. And, to say all in a word, everything which belongs to the body is a stream, and what belongs to the soul is a dream and vapor, and life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after fame is oblivion.

What then is that which is able to conduct a man? One thing and only one, philosophy. But this consists in keeping the daemon within a man free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy, not feeling the need of another man's doing or not doing anything; and besides, accepting all that happens, and all that is allotted, as coming from thence, wherever it is, from whence he himself came; and, finally, waiting for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than a dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded.

But if there is no harm to the elements themselves in each continually changing into another, why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements? For it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature.

---

Alternative Religious Education  
235 East 13<sup>th</sup> St.  
apartment 1C (new)  
New York, NY 10003

Back copies of the Newsletter are available at: [www.gabrielmoran.net](http://www.gabrielmoran.net)

## STOICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

By Daniel Robinson

When the early “Jewish Christians” began the formation of what will come to be called Christianity, their appeals were within a philosophically competitive context that included Stoicism at its center.

Paul addresses his letters to people in the vast Roman world as he travels from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. He will confront not only peoples whose practices vary widely, whose own native ideas and theological convictions are of a sort that one would never have found in Athens or in Rome, but also those who have developed philosophical sophistication by studying in Athens. It is not surprising, then, that one of the characteristics of early Christian teaching is this transparent desire to establish the articles of faith, as it were, the teachings of the “true religion” on a foundation that is intellectually satisfying, intellectually rich, and convincing.

Thus, in Paul’s own writings, one will find ideas drawn from Stoic teaching. He was surely exposed to it in his native Tarsus, and it is voiced without attribution in his reflections on the natural world and its ordering. Consider 1 Corinthians 11:14: *Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him?* So, too, are Stoic influences evident in his treatment of one’s belief-in-God being a “natural” inclination, of belief as a “natural” inclination.

Indeed, that Stoicism was recognized as perhaps the worthiest adversary is clear from the arguments of the early fathers of the church against such ideas as the physicality of God. The running battle against such pagan notions will bring out some of the more discerning elements in early Christian philosophy as produced by such figures as Tertullian and Origen, the former actually citing Zeno and Cleanthes favorably.

These debts and debates were inevitable and productive. The early fathers of the church had to reconcile the teachings of the church, the message contained in the life of Christ himself, with a philosophy respected as one of the great achievements of human thought, even if it was “pagan” thought. There should not be, therefore, an unbridgeable distance between the lessons of faith and the lessons of philosophy. Given the historical period in which these developments are taking place, it is Stoic philosophy that must provide the bridge, or at least the major planks of any bridge, that will lead to the central tenets of Christianity.

Let us consider, then, some of the features of Stoicism that might have been promulgated at the time of the Jewish Christians, as these might be incorporated into the writings of Philo and others, seeing a mission similar to the one Philo had set for himself. There are obvious points of compatibility, but also problem areas that have to be dealt with.

First, the Stoics. For the Stoics, God is not a personal being concerned with human welfare as such, but a powerful “divine fire” of sorts. This force or power is rational in its essential nature, and immortal. For the cosmos to remain lawfully ordered, there must be the constant participation of the Logos itself—so there is an immediate presence of the divine agency in the cosmos, which is to say that the God of the Stoics, though not the personal God of Christianity and Judaism, is not remote from the affairs of the world, but integral to those affairs. The events of the physical and natural world are dynamic, and these must record, again, the constant participation of the Logos, the creative force. There’s the Stoic bridge to Christianity.

The Jews, the Christians, and the Jewish Christians deny the materiality of God as envisaged by Stoic philosophy; so, here we have a bind of sorts—a Stoic philosophical authority for a rational plan, something that is active and present in the world, something that makes the world conform to the scheme, but, at the same time, not something revealed directly to human intelligence. This is a problem.

How are we to reconcile the competing views? It is not a compromise solution but a radically new idea—namely that of God becoming incarnated in the form of a human being who will teach lessons and serve as a living example for a distracted human race, to be redeemed through his sacrifice. Here is God made man, which is to say, the immaterial incarnating itself materially in order to realize or further guarantee what on a Stoic account might be regarded as the Logos.

The manner in which the cosmos obeys the precepts that are central to Stoicism is by law, by natural law, by physical law. This aspect of Stoic teaching matches up perfectly with the Decalogue. How are we to understand what God expects of us? Consult the Ten Commandments; these come directly from God. And what are these commandments? They are laws of life. They call for pious respect for the God of all, for the recognition that reality is a created reality, that it is an ordered affair that represents the perfected nature of whatever creative energy brought it about. Nothing is to be placed in the scale of value that has brought everything about. “First, I am the Lord thy God,” do you see?

Now, why would such an entity do all this? This is something Stoicism, at least early and middle Stoicism, tends to leave unanswered, and that the Jewish Christians will answer. The cosmic creation is not undertaken for no reason at all. You don’t order the universe; you don’t impose lawfulness on the affairs of matter. You don’t give it shape and form. You don’t give it function. You don’t undertake the construction of everything there is through a perfect understanding of all possibilities unless—what? Unless the Creator has—and takes—an interest in this.

At work here is not an Aristotelian rational plan or the “God of the Stoics.” It is the God of the Hebrews, a providential God who takes an interest in his creation and takes a particular interest in that part of the creation that most reflects his goodness and perfection, that part of his creation that is, although fallen, in some sense, perfectible. This is the God of the Jews, the God of Islam, the God of Christianity.

