

Indifference *versus* Affirmation: Michel Foucault on the Stoic Idea of Life as a Test

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ABSTRACT: One popular image of Stoicism presents it as indifferent to external events, which are seen as the product of mechanical fate, with value residing only with inner virtue. A second popular image emphasizes an attitude of optimism and affirmation with regard to events, conceived as the result of divine providence. This chapter critically examines Foucault's proposal that the tension between these two images reflects a shift in emphasis between the Athenian Stoa (in particular Cleanthes, as reported by Cicero) and the Roman Stoa (primarily Seneca and Epictetus). While the Athenian Stoics saw external events as 'indifferents' (*adiaphora*), the Roman Stoics reconceived them as a test to be embraced. Sent by divine providence, apparent evils are neither evils nor unqualified indifferents but rather something to be embraced as benefits.

1. Indifference *versus* Affirmation

One popular image of the Stoic is of someone coldly indifferent to the world around them, dismissing everything that fate throws at them as irrelevant to their wellbeing.¹ External misfortunes are nothing to the Stoic, whose quality of life depends solely on their excellence of character (*SVF* 3.49). Virtue of character is the only thing that is genuinely good, while all external things and states of affairs are mere 'indifferents' (*SVF* 3.117). Although some of these external things might be 'preferred', they are ultimately of no concern because they do not add anything to the goodness of one's character. On this view, the Stoic adopts an attitude of indifference to all external events, whether beneficial or harmful, holding on to the central Stoic ethical claim that only virtue is truly good.

However, another image of the Stoic presents them as a naive optimist, claiming that all events that come to pass are the product of a divine providential force permeating Nature and identified with Reason (*SVF* 2.634). Everything that happens

¹ For simplicity I cite early Stoic material from *SVF* (the standard abbreviation for von Arnim 1903-24), by volume and fragment number. For the later Stoics and other ancient authors, I cite using standard Latin abbreviations of titles of their works. For Seneca (*Prov.* and *Ep.*) I quote from the translations in Seneca 2014 and 2015. For Epictetus (*Diss.*) I quote from Epictetus 1995. For Cicero (*Tusc.* and *Fin.*) I quote from Cicero 2001 and 2002.

is part of this providential plan in the best of all possible worlds that is repeated again and again in an eternal recurrence of the same. Given this rational and providential ordering of events, the Stoic's fundamental attitude is one of affirmation, embracing everything that happens to them as part of the natural and divine order. Part of what it means to live in harmony with Nature is to welcome what Nature brings, no matter what that might be (*SVF* 3.4).

There is an apparent tension between these two Stoic attitudes, which we might call a Stoic attitude of indifference, on the one hand, and a Stoic attitude of affirmation, on the other. If the Stoic believes in blind fate, then they may well embrace indifference; if they believe in divine providence, then perhaps they ought to practice affirmation. The problem, of course, is that the Stoics identified fate with providence (*SVF* 2.933, 937), making that kind of distinction untenable within the context of their philosophical system. So how might we account for these two different attitudes so often associated with Stoicism? Is one simply a misrepresentation? If so, which one? Is it possible to reduce the distance between these two attitudes? Or do they reflect shifting attitudes within the Stoic tradition, held by different figures in different times? According to Michel Foucault, this apparent tension can be explained by positing a shift in attitude between the earlier Athenian Stoics and the later Roman Stoics.

2. Life as a Test

In his late works Foucault discussed a wide range of Stoic topics and texts within the context of a number of overlapping projects concerned with ancient practices of the self.² The most detailed discussions of Stoic material can be found in the lecture courses he delivered at the Collège de France, which were published after his death. Of these, his 1981-82 lecture course entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* is especially rich in Stoic material.³ It is here, in a lecture delivered on the 17th March

² As Elden 2016 has shown, Foucault was engaged in three distinct projects in his final years, which were never fully disentangled from one another before the hasty publication of the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*. These were i) a history of sexuality, ii) a genealogy of the modern subject, and iii) an examination of ancient "technologies of the self". I have touched on this elsewhere in Sellars 2018 and Sellars (forthcoming).

³ This was first published in Foucault 2001 and is translated into English in Foucault 2005. For the sake of simplicity I give references to the English translation only.

1982, second hour (Foucault 2005: 437-52), that Foucault suggests that one of the defining characteristics of Stoicism in the Imperial period is the idea of approaching life as a test (*probatio*). For the Roman Stoics, unlike their Athenian predecessors, “life must be recognized, thought, lived, and practiced as a constant test” (2005: 437). Conceived in this way, external misfortunes ought not to be a matter of mere indifference, but rather welcomed as a contribution to ethical training.

This shift in attitude is, Foucault suggests, especially clear in the work of Seneca and Epictetus. For Seneca God the father loves like a father, with vigour, severity, and roughness (Foucault 2005: 438). This is indeed just how Seneca presents the Stoic god in his dialogue *On Providence*, a work that Foucault describes as “the basic text” for the idea of life as a test (*ibid.*). There, Seneca suggests that apparently adverse external events ought to be seen as opportunities to improve one’s virtue. Someone who grasps the Stoic claim that Nature is providentially ordered will no longer see negative external events as misfortunes but will rather regard them as “training exercises” for virtue (*Prov. 2.2*). According to Seneca, the virtuous person will welcome whatever happens to them as an opportunity to train themselves, just as a wrestler will welcome opponents. In the case of the wrestler, it would be a bad thing only to face lesser opponents, for they would soon lose their skill. Only genuinely challenging opponents give the wrestler the opportunity to show their talents and improve their game. Seneca suggests that the same applies in the case of virtue. As Foucault comments, Seneca’s God is a tough father who shows his love by testing and challenging his children. If someone accepts this idea, then their attitude towards misfortunes will be turned on its head. As Seneca puts it:

I will show how things that seem bad are not. Now I say this: first, that those things that you call harsh, that you call adverse and detestable, are in the interest of the very men to whom they occur; next, that they occur in the interest of everyone, for whom the gods have greater concern than for individuals; and after this, that the men to whom they occur are willing, and that if they are not willing, they are deserving of bad. (*Prov. 3.1*)

The person who cannot see that misfortunes are in fact good for them, Seneca says, will suffer something genuinely bad. This is not to claim that the external event will be itself bad; instead, by resisting the training that providential Nature brings, the

person will fall out of harmony with Nature and suffer the sort of mental conflict that the Stoics hold is genuinely bad.

Seneca's wrestling analogy illustrates the idea that adverse events might be seen as a form of ethical training. To this he draws a further parallel with surgery, to highlight the way in which such events sometimes play the role of painful cures. These are however just two ways of thinking about the same events. The virtuous person and those making progress towards virtue will appreciate adverse events as forms of training – and so no longer see them as misfortunes – while non-virtuous people who fail to grasp the providential intent behind such events will still see them as misfortunes, and it is for these people that such events function as cures. Although it might not seem that way, Seneca suggests that ultimately the non-virtuous will benefit from their experiences of adversity.

It is at this point that Seneca introduces the idea of being put to the test by providence. He claims that people only find out their true character when tested by events. If people were never tested by adversity then they would never come to see how they would react in such situations. As he puts it, "No one will know what you were capable of – not even you yourself" (*Prov.* 4.3). It is only when being tested that a person finds out just how virtuous they really are. This is why anyone working towards virtue will welcome adversity. It reveals their state of progress and lets them see what they have learned. As Seneca sums it up, "calamity is an opportunity for virtue" (*Prov.* 4.6). But even if the person making progress fails the test, they should still welcome it a further training for the next time. Seneca fleshes it out with some examples:

How can I know how much spirit you have against poverty, if you are immersed in wealth? How can I know how much resilience you have against dishonor and infamy and being hated by the people, if you are living your old age amid applause, if you are followed by a popularity that cannot be assailed and someone turns minds favorably toward you? How do I know how calm your mind will be when you confront deprivation, if the children you have raised are there before your eyes? I have heard you when you were consoling others. I would have taken notice only if you had consoled yourself, if you had forbidden yourself to grieve. (*Prov.* 4.5)

No one can claim to possess virtue, Seneca insists, until they have demonstrated it during a test.

Having rehabilitated so-called misfortunes, Seneca goes on to question the value of things that people usually consider to be examples of good fortune. If misfortune is in fact a benefit, then “an excess of good fortune is exceedingly dangerous” (*Prov.* 4.10). In contrast to the benefits that misfortune brings, good fortune encourages complacency, weakness, and laziness. It makes people feel dependent on the external goods they enjoy, which will inevitably at some point get taken away.

It is worth stressing here that Seneca presupposes a specific conception of the self. The real self is someone’s inner character; their body, by contrast, is less significant. Seneca seems to suggest that if providence damages someone’s body via illness or hunger, then no real harm has happened, for the real self remains unaffected. However, if providence makes someone’s life excessively comfortable, supplying all the needs of the body, that runs the risk of creating a genuine harm for their character, which will never be tested.

All this gives Seneca a ready response to the traditional problem of evil. In answer to the question of why good people suffer, Seneca can now say that it is right that the best people will be tested and trained the most. The better the person, the more adversity they should expect. At the same time he claims that it is important that apparent external goods – such as wealth and success – are distributed randomly among good and bad people, in order to make clear that these external things possess no inherent value:

This is god’s plan and the wise man’s alike: to show that the things that the crowd desires and fears are neither good nor bad. But it will be clear that things he has allotted to no one but the good man are good, and that things he has imposed only on bad men are bad. [...] God has no better way of removing people’s desire for things than by conferring them on the most disgraceful men and taking them away from the best men. (*Prov.* 5.1-2)

Here Seneca draws on the Stoic claim that all external things are neither good nor bad, and so deserve an attitude of indifference. But as we have seen, in *On Providence* as a whole Seneca proposes a far more positive attitude towards events.

For the good person, seemingly bad events are in fact beneficial and so ought to be welcomed as such. For a bad person, those same events are also benefits, even if they do not comprehend this at the time. Thus the correct attitude is one of affirmation, welcoming whatever happens. This attitude of affirmation is closely tied up with the idea of life as a test.

Seneca is not the only Stoic to develop this idea. Foucault also refers to Epictetus (2005: 440). In his *Discourses*, on the topic of how someone ought to contend with difficulties (*Diss.* 1.24), Epictetus suggests that one should think of God as a gymnasium trainer, matching people against tough opponents in order to help them to become Olympic champions. Difficulties are always opportunities and one ought to approach them just as a wrestler faces his next challenger. Echoing Seneca, Epictetus says that it is only when faced with difficulties that we find out what someone really amounts to (*Diss.* 1.24.1).

Commenting on these texts, Foucault suggests that there are two key ideas: first, that one is educated and tested throughout one's life – “life and training are co-extensive” (2005: 440) – and, second, that the test stands as a mark to distinguish the good from the wicked, for the good are tested and the wicked are not. He says:

We should no longer consider these tests, these misfortunes, as evils. We are really forced to consider them as goods that we should benefit from and put to use in the individual's formation. We do not encounter a single difficulty that, precisely as difficulty, suffering, and misfortune, is not as such a good. (2005: 441)

Returning to Epictetus, we find in the *Discourses* the claim that it is possible to draw advantage from every external circumstance. The enemy who injures or insults someone is, once again, their wrestling partner who trains them in patience and in avoiding anger (*Diss.* 3.20.9). A wicked neighbour may be bad, but only for himself, not for anyone else, who can benefit from the moral training he unwittingly gives (*Diss.* 3.20.11). Similarly whatever someone faces can be turned into a source of benefit and ultimately a source of happiness (*Diss.* 3.20.15), including poverty, illness, and even death. Perhaps with Socrates in mind, Epictetus describes death as potentially a moment of glory, an opportunity for someone to show by their deeds what sort of person it is who follows the will of Nature (*Diss.* 3.20.13).

3. Athenian *versus* Roman Stoics

Having presented this Roman Stoic theme of life as a continual test designed to benefit people, Foucault says that this is an important idea because it is very close to what he calls “a wholly traditional Stoic theme”, but adds “and yet it is very different” (2005: 442). In what Foucault calls “classical Stoicism”, by which he means the early Athenian Stoa, there is he says “a nullification of evil” grounded on the claim that all external events are indifferents (*adiaphora*). The key source that Foucault relies on here is Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*. In a discussion about how best to comfort people in distress, Cicero reports the early Stoic claim that the best way to do this is “to teach the sufferer that what happened is not an evil at all” (*Tusc.* 3.76). Cicero attributes this view to Cleanthes (cf. *SVF* 1.576). He contrasts this Stoic view with other philosophical responses on offer, such as Peripatetic and Epicurean ones, but the differences between the various consolatory responses to the person in distress vary between teaching them that “what happened either is not a bad thing or is bad only in a very small degree” (*Tusc.* 3.77). In Cicero’s summary of available philosophical opinions, no one proposes trying to show that what is bad is in fact beneficial to the sufferer. In general, Cicero seems doubtful about the Stoic position, both that it can remove distress from someone presently caught up in emotional turmoil and that all external events are neither good nor bad. If the early Stoics had argued that such adverse events were in fact beneficial, and so for all practical purposes good for us, it seems hard to imagine that Cicero would not have reported that view, if only to deride it as even more absurd. The early Stoic attitude of indifference is, for Cicero, noble but unrealistic; he may have been far less credulous about the Roman Stoic attitude of affirmation.

If we turn to his account of early Stoic ethics in *On Ends*, we see Cicero report the standard Stoic view that pain, illness, poverty, and the like are things for which the Stoic has good reasons to reject and to avoid so far as they can (*Fin.* 3.51). These are, of course, classified as things non-preferred (*apoproégmenon*). Since, as Cicero puts it, “everyone by nature loves themselves”, the appropriate action will be to pursue those things that accord with our nature, and reject those that do not (*Fin.* 3.59). Implicit in Cicero’s account is a very naturalist understanding of what a human being is: illness and poverty harm people insofar as they are embodied, living beings. This is at one level perfectly consistent with what we know about Stoic physics and metaphysics: people are fundamentally bodies, because only bodies exist (*SVF* 1.90). By contrast, as we saw earlier with Seneca, the Roman Stoic view,

with its focus on moral training, implicitly identifies the individual with their virtue or excellent character. This alone is the essential self, and what counts as beneficial or harmful is decided with reference to this moral character rather than to the person conceived as a physical, embodied organism.

We can see the way in which the early Stoic attitude of indifference derives from their value theory. Foucault also claims that for the Athenian Stoics the fact that events are part of a providential order of things is another reason not to count them as evil. However, for the Athenian Stoics, on Cicero's account that Foucault reports, even if I recognize an evil event as part of a divine providential plan, it still harms me (2005: 443). Illness, for instance, is a real harm to the individual *qua* biological, living being, even if not something bad in itself. That real harm is what makes it something non-preferred (*apoproégmenon*). For the Roman Stoics, by contrast, such an event is transfigured into a good event "precisely inasmuch as it harms me" as Foucault puts it (2005: 443). He goes on to write:

The transfiguration into good takes place at the very heart of the suffering caused, insofar as this suffering is actually recognized, lived, and practiced as such by the subject. [...] In the case of Epictetus [...] there is, if you like, another type of mutation due to the test attitude, which doubles and adds a value to every personal experience of suffering, pain, and misfortune, a value that is directly positive for us. This added value does not nullify the suffering; it attaches itself to it, rather, and makes use of it. It is insofar as it harms us that the evil is not an evil. (2005: 443)

In both cases the evil event is nullified. In early Athenian Stoicism it is nullified by reference to the whole through an intellectual process that leads to an attitude of indifference. In later, Roman Stoicism it is nullified by reference to oneself through a very personal process that leads to an attitude of affirmation. Consequently Foucault suggests that this later, Roman Stoic attitude is "something quite fundamental and [he says], I think, very new with regard to what may be considered the general theoretical framework of Stoicism" (2005: 443). The tension that we opened with, between a Stoic attitude of indifference and one of affirmation, reflects a shift in attitude that took place at some point during the transmission of Stoicism from Athens to Rome; this is Foucault's important claim.

So, according to Foucault there is something strikingly new in Roman Stoicism. Foucault ends his discussion by making three general remarks on this new Stoic attitude (2005: 443-7). The first is that this Stoic testing by God is quite unlike the suffering inflicted by the Gods in Greek tragedy. Whereas that could be cruel and vindictive, the Stoic God of Seneca and Epictetus is benevolent and paternalistic. The second is that neither Seneca nor Epictetus tell us what this is a test for, if *all* of life is supposed to be a test. The third is that this Roman Stoic attitude was later taken up by Christianity. One can see in these remarks where perhaps Foucault's real interest lies: he is looking at Roman Stoicism as a stepping stone between pagan Greek culture and later Christian culture.⁴ It is with the Roman Stoics, he suggests, that we find the seeds of themes that will later become prominent in Christianity.

We shall have to put that larger question about how the Roman Stoics fit into a story of developing attitudes towards the self, stretching from pagan Greece to early Christianity, to one side. It is certainly important for understanding Foucault's own project. In the present context, we shall remain focused on whether there was indeed a shift in attitude between the Athenian and the Roman Stoics.

4. Conceptions of the Self

At the beginning we saw that one way in which someone might try to account for a shift from an attitude of indifference to one of affirmation would be to suggest a change in emphasis from fate to providence: a Stoic who believes in blind fate may well adopt an attitude of indifference to the events that such fate brings, while a Stoic who believes in divine providence might be more likely to embrace an attitude of affirmation. However as we saw then, such a distinction is untenable given the Stoics' identification of fate with providence. That the Athenian Stoics – and in particular Cleanthes, who was their representative earlier – were committed to a belief in providence also seems to be beyond doubt (cf. *SVF* 1.527, 537). So, an appeal to a distinction between fate and providence will not help.

A more plausible explanation might be one that we touched on earlier, namely a shift in the conception of self. Implicit in Cicero's account of the early Stoic position

⁴ As I noted earlier, in Foucault's late work one of the central themes was a project to map a genealogy of the subject; see Foucault 2016: 22, with Sellars 2018: 15-16.

was the claim that benefits and harms refer to the individual conceived as a living, embodied organism. Illness is a harm rather than a benefit because it undermines someone *qua* biological entity. This claim is built upon the Stoic theory of appropriation (*oikeiôsis*) with which Cicero opens his account of Stoic ethics in *On Ends*:

every animal, as soon as it is born [...], is concerned with itself, and takes care to preserve itself. It favours its constitution and whatever preserves its constitution, whereas it recoils from its destruction and whatever appears to promote its destruction. (*Fin.* 3.16)

For the early Stoa, then, people are first and foremost animals (*animal* in Cicero's Latin (*SVF* 3.182); *zôion* in the parallel account in Diog. Laert. 7.85, *SVF* 3.178). For the Roman Stoics, by contrast, their notion of what benefits and what harms seems to be focused solely on the individual's virtue or character. On this account, the resilience and strength of character someone gains from battling a severe illness makes that illness a genuine benefit rather than a harm. This seems to imply a quite different conception of self.

Presented in these terms it does indeed look as if there might be a sharp division between the Athenian and Roman Stoic attitudes, one that is grounded on different conceptions of the self. But we need to ask whether the division is so sharp. Did, for instance, the Roman Stoics disown or downplay the theory of *oikeiôsis* that presupposes a conception of the individual as an animal? Seneca certainly did not, as we can see in his *Letter* 121 (cf. *SVF* 3.184). There, he explicitly responds to the question we face here. In a discussion of animals' perception of their own constitution, in which he adopts what we might call a phenomenological account that prioritizes knowledge of being an embodied agent over theoretical understanding (*Ep.* 121.11), Seneca considers the following objection:

You say that every animal from the outset is attached to its own constitution, but also that the human constitution is a rational one. Therefore the human being is attached to itself not as an animate creature but as a rational creature, for the human being is dear to itself by virtue of that part that makes it human. How, then, can a baby be attached to a rational constitution when it is not yet rational? (*Ep.* 121.14)

Seneca's response to this objection involves a lengthy account of human development (*Ep.* 121.15-24). Each stage of a human life has its own constitution, and these are different for babies, children, youths, and adults. The individual is attached to its present constitution, whatever that might at present be, and that will be an entirely natural and intuitive attitude (*Ep.* 121.15-16). Whatever the individual's present constitution might be, it is combined with "a natural instinct toward self-preservation" (*Ep.* 121.20). As Seneca puts it,

each animal is attached to its own preservation, it both seeks out what will be beneficial and avoids what will be harmful. Impulses toward useful things are natural, aversions to their opposites are also natural.
(*Ep.* 121.21)

Frustratingly, Seneca does not address directly the first part of the imagined objection, namely the apparent tension between humans being attached to themselves as either an animate creature or a rational creature. Yet the response he gives does supply the building blocks for a more direct reply to that problem. First, it is clear that Seneca remains committed to Stoic naturalism and to the claim that humans are simply a type of animal. (At 121.3 he describes humans as produced by nature and superior to *other* animals (*animalibus ceteris*), acknowledging that humans are themselves animals.) Second, it is also clear that an individual's sense of their own constitution will change over time as they develop and grow, and this change in conception will not be the product of reflection, but rather something entirely intuitive. The rational adult will not reflect on the fact that now his rationality is an important part of his identity and must be preserved; rather, part of his being a rational adult will naturally and automatically include an instinct to preserve his rationality. Implicit, but only implicit, is the further claim that the rational adult will prioritize the preservation of their rationality over their survival as a living animal. (And perhaps as one gets older the desire to preserve the body that is by now naturally in a state of decline also declines.) As we have seen, that claim becomes all too explicit later in Epictetus, but it is already present in Cicero's account of early Stoic ethics when he describes the development of human concern from basic physical needs to a desire for consistency (*homologia*) and concordance (*Fin.* 3.21). Although this is a later development, Cicero says that "it is none the less the only thing to be sought in virtue of its own power and worth, whereas none of

the primary objects of nature [i.e. food, shelter, etc] is to be sought on its own account" (ibid.).

All this suggests that trying to point to two quite distinct conceptions of the self in Athenian and Roman Stoicism in order to explain the shift in attitude from indifference to affirmation is unlikely to work. The difference, if there is one, is far more subtle and perhaps merely a matter of emphasis. The rational adult remains an embodied, biological organism with physical requirements, to which is added a sense of self as a rational being. On Seneca's account in *Letter* 121 these are not opposed but rather are parts of a single nature. While the rational adult will increasingly identify with their rational nature as their rationality develops, the extent to which this completely replaces (rather than augments) their existing sense of self as an embodied agent is harder to discern. It is of course worth remembering that all the training and testing that Seneca and Epictetus think adversity gives us, is for the sake of improving our ability to act within the world and to enjoy our lives as embodied, living beings. As we have seen, both are fond of the analogy with wrestling when describing this sort of testing, emphasizing that the task at hand is about developing a set of skills for use in very physical situations. For both the Athenian and the Roman Stoics, then, humans are very much embodied beings in the world.

It looks, then, as if neither an appeal to a distinction between fate and providence nor an appeal to a distinction between different conceptions of the self will take us very far in understanding this shift in attitude from indifference to affirmation. Instead, perhaps we ought just to focus on this new Roman Stoic attitude of treating life as a test. This is what Foucault does in his discussion. Let us return to his account and add some comments.

5. Life *as if* a Test

In his account of the Roman Stoic attitude, Foucault says that it is important that misfortunes are experienced *as* misfortunes. As we saw earlier, Foucault claims that for Epictetus the test attitude does not nullify the suffering but adds a positive value to it (see 2005: 443, quoted above). This is an interesting claim by Foucault but it needs to be qualified. The texts by both Seneca and Epictetus that Foucault discusses are addressed to philosophical novices who no doubt *would* have seen these events as misfortunes, but it is not clear that they *must* or even *ought* to be

experienced as misfortunes. On the contrary, the thrust of the argument in both Seneca and Epictetus is that such events are precisely not misfortunes; they are benefits. Once someone sees this, they see that they *are* benefits unconditionally and ought to be experienced as such, with no hint of misfortune remaining. It is true that, for instance, illness may harm the body, but that harm is nothing compared to the benefit gained from the development or exercise of one's virtuous character. The benefit simply overwhelms the physical discomfort.

We might also ask how seriously we ought to take the language used by Seneca and Epictetus. When Seneca presents life's challenges as a test, is he seriously suggesting that they have been conceived as a test by a benevolent deity, or is he rather suggesting that we ought to approach those challenges *as if* sent as a test? The language that Seneca uses certainly makes this a possibility: when he says that the good person "thinks of adversities as training exercises" (*Prov.* 2.2), the key word is *putare*, which can mean "to think", "to suppose", "to regard", "to consider", "to imagine". At this point we might distinguish between three distinct beliefs that Foucault ascribes to Seneca:

- i) a belief in divine providence;
- ii) the belief that adverse situations train and test our character; and
- iii) the belief that adverse situations are deliberately sent by a benevolent deity to train and test us.

Seneca may well be sincerely committed to a belief in providence and he might also hold that adverse situations do benefit us, insofar as they do train and test our character, but neither of those beliefs necessarily commits him to the further claim that such adversities were conceived and sent as a test. Even so, it may be beneficial for us to think of them *as if* a test. It is important again to remember that in these texts both Seneca and Epictetus are addressing philosophical novices who are seeking guidance for how to cope with difficult situations; that is, they are offering practical advice rather than formally presenting their considered theological views. Indeed, in the opening paragraph of *On Providence* Seneca is explicit that he will not address theological questions about providence and God's interest in us (*Prov.* 1.1). The primary goal is to offer coping strategies, not to explain the intentions of Zeus. The image of God the benevolent father that we find in *On Providence* is, to quote one commentator, "hardly more than metaphor" (Setaioli 2014: 389). Seneca's God, according to the same commentator, "is not, and cannot be, a personal god" (*ibid.*).

If we turn to Epictetus, we find something similar. In one especially relevant passage (*Diss.* 1.6.32), he writes, “what figure do you think Heracles would have made if there had not been a lion like the one they tell of, and a hydra, and a stag, and unjust and brutal men, whom he drove off and chased away?” Heracles could not have been Heracles without a continual stream of adversity, Epictetus insists. Even if he could still have been Heracles, what benefit would that be without the appropriate trials in which to exercise his talents? Epictetus goes on to say that these trials “were of service to reveal Heracles’ nature and exercise him” (*Diss.* 1.6.36). He then says that, having grasped this lesson, the philosophical novice ought to say “Bring on me now, O Zeus, whatever difficulty you will, for I have the means and resources granted to me by yourself to bring honour to myself through whatever may come to pass” (*Diss.* 1.6.37). In this discourse by Epictetus – which, like Seneca’s essay, is entitled *On Providence* – the focus is likewise on extracting practical benefit from whatever happens, however apparently adverse. The invocation of Zeus may well be sincerely meant, but, as others have suggested in the case of Seneca, it may be little more than a metaphor, akin to present day exclamations of “O God” every time something goes wrong.

In these contexts, then, it would perhaps be a mistake to place too much weight on references to divine actions. One could go further and for the sake of argument doubt the sincerity of Seneca’s or Epictetus’s belief in divine providence (although I leave that question open for the moment), without undermining the belief that adverse situations might benefit us. Indeed, later Friedrich Nietzsche held just that view, as he outlines in his *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* 343, which, it has been suggested, may be a gloss on a passage from one of Seneca’s *Letters* (Ure 2016: 301, who compares it with Seneca, *Ep.* 9.18-19):

If life has treated a man like a brigand, and has taken from him all it could in the way of honours, friends, adherents, health, possessions of all kinds, he may perhaps, after the first shock, discover that he is *richer* than before. For it is only now that he knows what is truly his, what no brigand is able to get his hands on; so that he perhaps emerges out of all this plundering and confusion wearing the noble aspect of a great landed proprietor. (Nietzsche 1986: 291)

Indeed, it is interesting to note that Nietzsche, one of Foucault's favourite authors, often takes up this Roman Stoic attitude of life as a test, while clearly having no philosophical commitment to any kind of belief in providence. In one of the "Maxims and Arrows" in *Twilight of the Idols*, he wrote, "*From the military school of life. – What does not kill me makes me stronger*" (Nietzsche 1990: 33). It is difficult to know whether Nietzsche intended this positively or negatively, and it depends, of course, of whether he thought the military attitude was worthy of admiration. Even so, what this shows is that it is perfectly possible to hold this attitude of life as a test without being committed to a belief in divine providence. Foucault seems to take the two to be closely intertwined, perhaps as part of the narrative he wants to tell about the pre-history of certain Christian beliefs. In Seneca's *On Providence* they are presented as interrelated, but, as we have seen, there is no necessary connection, and Seneca's argument, at least in the opening sections, is more about how a good person relates to misfortunes rather than the source of those misfortunes (cf. *Prov.* 2.1). His argument is not that they were sent by providence, but rather that they are not misfortunes. Indeed, it has been commented that Seneca's essay is somewhat disappointing with regard to its response to the traditional problem of reconciling providence and misfortune (Setaioli 2014: 390). It is possible to approach every adverse situation as an opportunity to improve and test one's character without having to think that a benevolent deity conceived them for that purpose. One might, like Nietzsche (and, later, Deleuze), see them as the product of a blind fate to which one ought not to be unworthy, or one might, like Marcus Aurelius, reserve judgement on their cause – providence or atoms – and instead simply focus on how best to make use of what happens. In sum, this practical attitude of treating life as a test need not commit one to any specific claims about fate, providence, or the nature of the self.

6. Conclusions

Foucault's interest in the Roman Stoic idea of life as a test – an interest perhaps primed by his longstanding admiration of Nietzsche – sheds light on an important aspect of Roman Stoicism. His claim that this was something new, not prefigured by the Athenian Stoics, helps to bring into focus the ways in which the Roman Stoics made their own distinctive contribution to Stoic thought. His wider concerns in his late work with the historical development of conceptions of the self made him especially sensitive to these sorts of shift in attitude. However, as we have seen, it is difficult to give an adequate account of how or why this new attitude came about.

One final question worth asking is why Foucault thought this new attitude was so significant. His answer is that the rise of this idea of seeing the whole of life as a test highlights the Greco-Roman attitude of care of the self. Someone who thinks that they are continually being tested by every event that happens, “must live one’s life in such a way that one cares for the self at every moment” (2005: 448). This turns life into a perpetual concern for the self, focused on how one responds to events, rather than the events themselves. This is why, he suggests, the question of whether these really are tests sent by a benevolent deity falls into the background in Seneca and Epictetus:

Between the rational God, who, in the order of the world, has set around me all the elements, the long chain of dangers and misfortunes, and myself, who will decipher these misfortunes as so many tests and exercises for me to perfect myself, between this God and myself, henceforth the issue is only myself. (2005: 448-9)

Foucault concludes by saying that “it seems to me that we have here a relatively important event in the history of Western subjectivity” (2005: 449). Foucault’s Roman Stoics are not mere popular moralizers who fail to live up to the philosophical greatness of their Athenian predecessors; instead they stand as significant contributors to the development of the idea of the Subject.

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