



# STOICISM AND CHRISTIANITY

Christopher Gill



## A rich and complex relationship

The history of the relationship between Stoicism is rich and complex. My focus here is on comparing and contrasting the two frameworks on two central points: ethics, especially interpersonal ethics, and the question of the grounding of ethical principles.

## Two greatest commandments

In Matthew 22:37-40, Jesus presents as the first two, and greatest, commandments loving God with all your mind, heart, and soul and loving your neighbour as yourself. In Luke 10:27, the same statement by Jesus provokes the question: ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Jesus responds with the parable of the good Samaritan, who helps someone in great need from outside his community, while others pass him by (10:29-37).

The Stoic theory of development (understood as ‘appropriation’, *oikeiosis*) presents as two primary human instincts the motive to care for yourself and for others of your kind. The boundaries of those who count as being potentially ‘of your kind’ and worthy of our care are all or any other human beings, including those in need from outside your own community (Cicero, *On Ends* 3.16-22, 62-8, *On Duties* 1.11-15, 50-9). In these respects, Christian and Stoic interpersonal ethics are closely parallel.

Christian ethics might seem, at first glance, more altruistic (and thus more

admirable), in stressing the importance of loving your neighbour. But notice how this idea is expressed: ‘loving your neighbour as yourself’; and the importance of caring for and loving yourself (properly) is underlined in this and many other ways in Christian teaching.

In Stoic thought, the pathway towards the complete expression of the core motives of care for oneself and others consists in developing the virtues and achieving virtue-based happiness (this is also part of the theory of appropriation). In Christianity, the pathway of life recommended is sometimes presented as realizing the virtues, but also as expressing love of God or following Jesus.

## Grounds for ethical principles

Here, we come to the question of the grounds for ethical principles.

In Christianity, as in the passage quoted, love of neighbour (as yourself) is presented as grounded in love of God or as following Jesus.

Are Stoic ethical principles also described as grounded in the nature of the universe (the *cosmos*) or in the divinity in-built into nature? Sometimes, they are presented in this way, for instance in a famous passage ascribed to Chrysippus, in which virtue and virtue-based happiness are presented as ‘harmonizing’ yourself with the will of Zeus or the order in-built in the nature of the universe

(Diogenes Laertius 7.88).

However, elsewhere ethical principles (achieving virtue and happiness) are presented as the realization of human nature, conceived as rational and sociable, without reference to cosmic nature (for instance, in Arius Didymus’ summary of Stoic ethics, ch. 6).

The theory of appropriation, again, implies that the capacity and wish to develop the virtues and progress towards happiness are in-built in all human beings and form the natural framework for a normal human life.

Here, then, is a rather profound difference from Christianity. Whereas in Christianity, love or worship of God is seen as the foundation of ethics, in Stoicism, ‘harmonization’ with universal nature is only one of a number of ways of thinking about the grounding of ethics, and these different ways are seen as compatible and coordinate with each other. So the similarities between Christianity and Stoicism on ethical principles co-exist with significant differences in the way these principles are seen as grounded.

*From Arius Didymus’ summary of Stoic ethics, preserved by Stobaeus, see Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson, The Stoics Reader (Indianapolis, 2008), pp. 124-51: ch. 6 is on pp. 132-3.*

*Christopher Gill is Professor Emeritus of Ancient Thought at the University of Exeter and author of many books on Stoicism.*