

Stoic Evolution Theory

by Br. César

In this observation, I try to unpack the Stoic Evolution Theory (SET) as explained to me by Brother Erik and Brother Paul. This short essay aims to identify SET's relevance to Stoic progress.

Brother Paul and Brother Erik suggest that there are levels of Stoic practicing. Leveling up and thus making progress can only happen by *committing* to the practice of Stoic principles. Commitment leads to regular practice, which *can* lead to Stoic evolution. However, it may also be that the practitioner only makes progress but does not evolve.

I understand "evolution" as the transition from one stage of Stoic practicing to the next. For example, when the Stoic atheist turns into an agnostic, he's evolved. Similarly, when the agnostic adopts the beliefs of the traditional Stoic, he's evolved as well. These evolutions naturally bring new and more strenuous practices, leading the practitioner to incorporate highly spiritual rituals.

I'm positive that those who keep searching, studying, and struggling to learn how to live a *eudaimonic* life feel a restless desire, a reasonable desire (*boulesis*) to do so. But how can we explain that some Stoics can't (or don't) evolve to become traditional Stoics or monks? Is it because of a lack of commitment? Before speculating an answer to the above inquiry, we must first deal with a pivotal question: is evolution the goal of the Stoic? I don't think so. Not if we define evolution as the transition from one stage of Stoic practicing to the next.

The goal of the Stoic was and will always be progress. Those atheists who stay atheist all their lives can't evolve, but they *can* make progress while staying an atheist. A definition of progress is now due. I understand Stoic progress as the accumulation of correct actions over a period of time. However, correct actions are the result of knowledge. And as we'll see below, acquiring the knowledge required for what SET calls "evolution" may not be up to us. Socratic (Moral) Intellectualism would even question whether progress is possible without knowledge. However, in this essay, I can accept it

as possible.

According to Stoic physics, those stuck at a particular phase *need* to stay stuck. Un-evolving Stoics are as crucial to the arrangement of Cosmos as are evolving Stoics. Fate decides all that. The Stoic God also decides how quickly or slowly those allowed to "evolve" (or make progress) move along the spectrum of Stoic practicing. But progress and evolution are certainly not synonyms. And it seems that only progress is up to us.

Suppose Chrysippus' thesis is correct, and morality depends on knowledge of the cosmic order. In this belief, it is implicit that moral progress—necessary for regular progress and evolution—is limited to knowledge of the cosmic order. So without "enough" cosmic order knowledge, the Stoic might not be able to evolve or, for that matter, make any kind of progress. However, not knowing what Fate has in store for each of us, we can still try to acquire that knowledge by practicing Stoic principles. But the outcome, and I am thinking about the ability to "evolve," will never be up to us.

Further, SET suggests that the next natural progression after the phases of Stoic atheism, Stoic agnosticism, and traditional Stoicism comes indeed Stoic monkhood. This proposition raises an interesting question: are evolved Stoics closer to sagehood? It is impossible, even arrogant, to speculate how far away Stoic sagehood might be from monkhood. There may even be more stages after Stoic monkhood. For that reason, it's likely we will never know the size of the gap between our current stage of Stoic practicing and sagehood. Nor do we need to if Fate controls it all. The Stoic ideal is not necessarily the Stoic goal. Sagehood may not be a reachable outcome, so the Stoic must always lean on progress, which is up to us.

Another intriguing point SET suggests is that those who evolve incorporate highly spiritual rituals. Spirituality is yet another term that can mean different things to different people. Some of us believe that a spiritual gym is akin to finding new ways to push the metaphysical envelope. This idea is not far from mysticism. Needless to say, some highly "evolved" Stoics will not want to push that envelope. That's also fated, and it is not wrong.

Why push the metaphysical envelope if Stoic sagehood has always been the ideal and Stoic doctrines have led that way to get there for millennia? Our Stoic heroes of the past, who we think got closer to sagehood than anyone else, possibly did so without practicing any form of mysticism and by solely focusing on Stoic

tenets. However, SET and some of our Brothers and Sisters may have something else to say.

Moreover, traditional Stoics will most likely take the non-mystical route. Perhaps I do too. But right now, I cannot help to observe with interest what other Posidonians like Br. Erik are doing. Could it be that we get access to higher knowledge once we reach a higher level of commitment and practice? Could it be that up there, which Fate might or not allow us to reach, our inner *daimon* can commute with a possible external *daimon*?

SET suggests some practitioners can evolve, and if this theory is true and I am one of those practitioners (and this may lead to higher knowledge—which I believe it could), I'd like to try it. But again, I may be destined to stay stuck here and not move an inch further.

In conclusion, progress is not evolution but can lead to it. Only progress is up to us, and Fate decides who gets to evolve. If evolution works as I described above, it's possible to point out more or less our position in the spectrum of Stoic practicing. But all parts of the spectrum are equally good for the Whole. Therefore, those allowed to "evolve" should understand they are not superior to non-evolving Stoics. Each one plays their part the same way Marcus played emperor and Epictetus played slave. And actively playing the role assigned to us will make the best arrangement for the Cosmos.