

One True Life: The Stoics and Early Christians as Rival Traditions. By C. Kavin Rowe. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. Pp. 344. \$40.00 (hardback). 978-0300180121.

William O. Stephens

Comparative study of Stoicism and early Christianity has grown the last two decades (Engberg-Pedersen 2000, Rasimus 2010, Thorsteinsson 2010, Dodson and Briones 2017). Rowe's book joins this group. A short introduction is followed by chapters on Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Paul, Luke, and Justin Martyr. The last three chapters argue that Stoicism and Christianity are competing traditions of true lives or ways of life. But are lives or ways of life true or false? Or are they good or bad, better or worse, wise or foolish? Statements are true or false. Hence, to apply truth and falsity to ways of life commits a category mistake. While the ancient Stoics made no such mistake, Rowe does. Seneca considered whether a life is wise or fearful; Epictetus whether a life is free or servile; Marcus whether his life was beneficial or deceived. Rowe regards his own Christian way of life as *true* and all others, including liberal Protestantism, as *false*.

Reading only Seneca's letters and none of his other works, Rowe selects as themes death, Fortuna, God, the passions, and philosophy. He labels the Stoics materialists, but this claim distorts the position of the early Stoics, who held that time, place, and *lekta* ('propositions') subsist while bodies, including the pneumatic stuff that constitute souls, exist. Thus, the early Stoics were corporealists, not materialists. Rowe claims that Stoics from Chrysippus on tightly linked fate and a kind of universal determinism. Yet the case is strong that Chrysippus endorsed a complex theory of compatibilism accepted by subsequent Stoics (cf. Bobzien 1998). So to describe the Stoics as universal determinists is inaccurate.

Themes chosen in Epictetus are God, right judgments, philosophy, anthropology, and society. Rowe faults Long 2002 for focusing on the *Discourses* rather than the *Manual*. Long's reason for this—that the *Manual* is, in a sense, more Arrian and less Epictetus than the *Discourses*—is lost upon Rowe. Perhaps Rowe prefers the *Manual* since it is much shorter than the *Discourses*. In any case, he is not sensitive to the complex nuances of the relationship between the *Discourses* and the *Manual*.

Rowe fancies that he knows the mind of Epictetus better than any academics analyzing Epictetus' language. Above all other Stoics, Rowe deems Epictetus worthy of the title theologian, since for Epictetus 'God is the possibility and direction of the philosophical life' (44). Whether that direction is true north, the

zenith above one's head, or downhill, Rowe does not say. Epictetus nowhere speaks of *theos* as a possibility or a direction. Moreover, Bonhöffer's three books on Epictetus (1890, 1894, 1911) are unknown to Rowe, so he merely says that Epictetus' theological language is complex. Rowe unhelpfully likens Epictetus' theological sensibility to that of Goethe and Wordsworth. A comparison to an earlier Stoic like Cleanthes or Seneca or at least to another ancient philosopher would have been more illuminating, and indeed, truer to the Stoic tradition of thought. Even worse, Rowe calls Epictetus a kind of empiricist while also bizarrely asserting a similarity between Epictetus' epistemology and the doctrine of *anamnesis* in Plato's *Meno* (273). Rowe misleadingly describes *prohairesis* in Epictetus as a 'place' (61) rather than (a faculty of) volition. Heedless of earlier studies (e.g., Dobbin 1991), Rowe does not see how texts like 'you yourself are neither flesh nor hair, but *prohairesis*' (*Disc.* iii 1.40) support the view of *prohairesis* as self in Epictetus (275). Rowe thinks that Epictetus is less concerned about human mortality than is Seneca, despite numerous texts in the *Discourses* and the *Encheiridion* (e.g., *Ench.* 21).

The themes examined in Marcus are death, god and nature, human beings and right judgments, philosophy, and society. According to Rowe, Marcus' Stoic politics commit him to being ultimately indifferent to all that happens outside of the control of his inward fortress (81). This is a common misunderstanding. Things outside one's control the Stoics classify as 'indifferents' because having or lacking them has no bearing on the possession of virtue, and thus they are indifferent to one's happiness. But the Stoics regard how well or poorly one handles these 'indifferents' as indicative of one's virtue or vice, and thus directly bearing upon one's happiness.

Rowe opens part 2 thus: 'As influential as the Stoics treated in this book have been, even their cumulative weight is virtually insignificant compared with St. Paul's' (85). Why, then, muck about with thinkers as puny as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus? Paul, Luke, and Justin function for Rowe as an ideological black hole into which all 'argument', reason, and inquiry descend, never to escape. This is partly due to his murky notion of abstractions. He declares that both 'henotheism' and 'monotheism' are abstractions. But which belief systems and concepts count as abstractions, which do not, and why? Rowe never addresses this question. Instead, he blithely assumes that Jesus of Nazareth is *not* an abstraction. Nonetheless, this assumption can be challenged.

The eventual Christianity of the four canonical gospels plus Paul and the other apostles' letters is at once a simplification mirage and a collusive agreement among leading Christians to allow a wide diversity of paradoxically conflicting opinions to coexist. We can illustrate early shifts in the wording of Jesus' sayings and actions by placing different versions of the same episode side by side. Many of the changes in description are minor, but the cumulative impact is to reduce the trust that we can properly place in any verbatim attribution. The result, in

my view, is that we cannot know with any security precisely, or even roughly, what Jesus said or did. (Hopkins 1999, 311-312)

Hopkins argues that there is no one 'story of Christianity' but only many competing stories, and so no one Jesus, but rather many different, rival Jesuses. Thus, the fact that Rowe likes some accounts of what Jesus said and did and dislikes others fails to discredit alternate accounts. So, when Rowe speaks of 'the Christian tradition', or 'the Christian way of life', those could well amount to seriously problematic abstractions.

Though Rowe insists that Justin is no simpleton (161), he simultaneously admits that Justin believed that demons (*daimones*) are the cause of bad choices and that the Romans were deceived by demons (165). Yet belief in balrogs and other demons bespeaks credulity, not sagacity.

Rowe categorizes most modern scholars of early Christianity and Stoicism as *encyclopedists*, *genealogists*, or *traditionists*. Encyclopedists assume a single, unitary, eternal, cosmopolitan rationality progressing toward truth itself. Nietzsche, Foucault, and subsequent genealogists reject the notion of objectified truth in favor of utterances on the move deployed in momentary stances, posing on a stage, wearing masks, and playing roles. For genealogists there is no cosmopolitanism and no progress between incommensurable ways of knowing. One can only take sides in the warring of various rivals. Following Alasdair MacIntyre, Rowe defends the traditionist view and praises its historical depth, norms of rational success, virtues of interpretation, teacher-student craft of inquiry, and long term cooperative activity in a community. From this traditionist perch, he lauds 'Spirit-enhanced "supernatural" discourse intelligible only to those on the inside of Christian faith' (190). He thinks that 'the modern comparative project depends upon a philosophical mistake in which a profound abstraction is taken for a real thing and believed to provide the categorical sense in which the work of comparison can be done' (192). Since there is no word for morality in any ancient or medieval language, Rowe infers that morality is an abstraction, as is religion. Yet he casually tosses about nouns like 'our existence', 'life', 'knowledge', 'mode-of-being-in-the-world', and 'existential distance' as if these terms were not equally abstractions. Rowe does not see that his own favored abstractions, *as* hopeless abstractions, undermine his position that traditionists are smarter than encyclopedists and genealogists. What does he imagine the ancient Greek or Latin terms for 'existential distance' are?

Rowe rejects the cosmopolitan assumption of modern comparativists that 'all texts must be capable of being translated into the language which the adherents of modernity speak to each other' (193). This rejection, however, introduces a skepticism that can bite Rowe right on his mode-of-being-in-the-world. That is because skepticism about translating ancient Greek and Latin texts into modern languages compromises the first third of Rowe's book. There he presents his translations of Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus, Paul, Luke, and Justin into modern English. Sadly, this task is doomed to inaccuracy and distortion according to his

own traditionist principles. It is not just that academics ought to read *and write* about ancient Christians and Stoics exclusively in the same ancient languages they used to have a chance of understanding them. Simulating their lives linguistically would not suffice. We would really have to live our lives in the same cultural, sociological, political, economic, agricultural, technological, and ecological circumstances that shaped the languages they spoke and wrote. Hence, Rowe's arguments do not just crush cosmopolitanism—surely another hopeless abstraction. His views invite relativism and skepticism about all kinds of inquiry, including MacIntyre's traditioned approach. On Rowe's analysis, there can be no Roman Catholicism in general, no Church of the East, no Oriental Orthodoxy, no Eastern Orthodoxy, no Evangelicalism, no Protestantism, and no Nontrinitarianism. These must all count as empty abstractions for Rowe. Moreover, since the notion of god is one of the most violently combatted throughout human history, for Rowe 'god' must be that abstraction than which none more abstract can be thought. Though Rowe says that 'we need God's help to see straight' (195), many self-identified Christians vehemently disagree about whose creed prescribes the proper corrective lenses. Xenophanes wisely cautions about the human tendency to create gods in our own phenotypes.

Rowe bemoans Engberg-Pedersen's attempt to present 'ideas as ideas' as a gross anachronism because '[n]either the ancient Christians nor the ancient Stoics thought of thought in this way' (195). Yet his own scheme leaves Rowe no epistemic position from which to make this claim even *tentatively*, much less dogmatically. Rowe is confident that he knows the minds of Paul, Luke, and Justin. But 21st century American consumer-capitalism during the Anthropocene is the traditioned world that birthed and raised Rowe. So, a good traditionist must doubt that he could really know how these ancients thought any better than any reader of this journal. Rowe cannot help but lapse into assuming the objectivity of truth even as he peddles subjectivism: 'I can perhaps reflect on what it might entail to know the truth of the Stoics' claims, for example, but *I cannot know* the truth of such claims apart from the lived I that knows them' (197). Rowe berates Engberg-Pedersen for modernizing the ancients, yet Rowe post-modernizes the ancients. This must be just as illicit on traditionist grounds. He tries to save his comparative approach with 'narrative juxtaposition', asserting that 'to know the story is to know the thing itself' (199). He holds that narrative is the substructure of non-narrative texts. Words, he asserts, are lived as existentially thick and existentially and communally dense (204). Rowe's existentialism is so thick and dense that it becomes impenetrable. He admits he cannot understand certain Stoic things in practice, yet he is, inexplicably, confident that *his* account will be closer to the truth than that of other scholars.

Stoics and Christians were rivals of a sort. Rowe thinks that Kierkegaard was right that we either take a leap of faith or do not by plunging into one way of life or another to discover whether that way of life is 'true'. Pascal was also right, Rowe believes, that we wager our lives one way or another. Pascal wagered on the Roman Catholic life whereas Kierkegaard bet on the life of a Lutheran pietist.

But our choice is not between life as a Roman Catholic or a Lutheran pietist, nor between life as a Stoic or a Christian. We face not only many rival Christian denominations, but varieties of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, the Bahá'í Faith, Taoism, scientology, and plenty of philosophical world-views. Through Rowe's spectacles, choosing how to live forecloses evaluation of which lives are better. That rings one false note. We can, and the ancients did, evaluate which lives are better.

Department of Philosophy
Creighton University
Omaha NE 68178

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bobzien, S. 1998. *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bonhöffer, A.F. 1890. *Epictet und die Stoa*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- Bonhöffer, A.F. 1894. *Die Ethik des stoikers Epictet*. Stuttgart: Enke.
- Bonhöffer, A.F. 1911. *Epiktet und das neue Testament*. Gießen: Töpelmann.
- Dobbin, R. 1991. 'Prohairesis in Epictetus' *Ancient Philosophy* 11: 111-135.
- Dodson, J. and D. Briones edd. 2017. *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue*. Leiden/Boston: Brill.
- Engberg-Pedersen, T. 2000. *Paul and the Stoics*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Hopkins, K. 1999. *A World Full of Gods: The Strange Triumph of Christianity*. New York: Penguin.
- Rasimus, T. et al. edd. 2010. *Stoicism in Early Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Long, A.A. 2002. *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thorsteinsson, R.M. 2010. *Roman Christianity and Roman Stoicism: A Comparative Study of Ancient Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.