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*An Essay on the Unity of Stoic Philosophy* by Johnny Christensen

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Johnny Christensen's short book entitled *An Essay on the Unity of Stoic Philosophy* (hereafter *Essay*) was first published in 1962. I read it in the 1990s when first starting to work on Stoicism, and at the time found it very helpful. It is, however, a somewhat anomalous book, taking the form of a brief overview without extensive scholarly apparatus while at the same time offering an advanced treatment of the material that can hardly be described as introductory. This, combined with the fact that it was published by a relatively small press, has meant that it has not always found a place in bibliographies of literature on Stoicism.

This new edition of Christensen's *Essay* is edited by two of his former students, both of whom have gone on to become highly respected scholars in their own right: Sten Ebbesen and Troels Engberg-Pedersen. In their brief but informative foreword to the new edition, they recount the reception of the *Essay* and its place within wider scholarship on Stoicism. As they note, it was often cited in Anglophone works on Stoic and Hellenistic philosophy from the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Rist [1969] and Long [1974]; but more recently it seems to have dropped off the radar. That is in some ways unsurprising given the huge amount of work that has been published on Stoicism in the interim. Indeed, when Rist and Long were writing their books, there were very few recent works in English devoted to Stoicism and Christensen's *Essay* was one of a handful of pioneering early works, alongside works such as Sambursky [1959] and Mates [1953]. In 1974, Long [254] described the *Essay* as 'the most philosophically sophisticated short introduction' available and Ebbesen and Engberg-Pedersen assert that it remains even today 'the philosophically most sophisticated attempt to make sense of Stoicism as a whole' [ix]. As well as adding their foreword, the editors have supplemented the original *Essay* with a reprint of an article

by Christensen on Stoic politics from 1984, a topic not covered in the *Essay* itself. In short, this new edition is a tribute to a clearly respected teacher whom his pupils think has been unfairly neglected by recent scholarship.

What of the *Essay* itself? It is indeed a spirited attempt to show the unity of Stoic philosophy, to try to understand Stoicism as a unified philosophical system. The most striking feature of Christensen's account is his emphasis on the Stoic commitment to what we might call, for want of a better phrase, process philosophy: 'To the Stoics the world is made of matter-in-motion. So, the elements of our experience are primarily *events*' [46–47]. Christensen takes this ontological claim as the fundamental principle of Stoicism. He sees this Heracliteanism as an explicit challenge to Platonism and Aristotelianism, and he focuses in particular on the way in which the Stoics might be seen to be responding to Aristotle, both in metaphysics and in ethics. This is at odds with what has become a dominant trend in recent Stoic scholarship, namely, to emphasize Stoic debts to Plato. Christensen, by contrast, downplays the extent to which the Stoics might have been engaging with Plato and insists on their philosophical independence from both him and his pupil. This strikes me as a useful corrective to a trend that has perhaps gone too far in trying to find Platonic antecedents to as many aspects of Stoic philosophy as possible. The Stoics are Plato's philosophical adversaries, not his descendants.

This emphasis on events over objects in Stoic ontology informs Christensen's whole approach to the various aspects of Stoic philosophy and a range of issues in logic and ethics are presented as working out the implications of this fundamental ontological commitment. As just one example, his discussion of Stoic epistemology does not take place in isolation but rather emphasizes its foundations in dynamic physics: 'knowledge is built out of an interaction between influx of motion from the external world and established patterns of motion in the mind' [58].

Some minor points to note: Christensen characterizes the two Stoic ἀρχαί as ἀσώματα [11], following the variant reading from the *Suda* sometimes adopted at Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 7.134. Later he suggests that Nature is composed of 'two constituents', Structure and Matter [23]. These two claims might be seen to go against one another and neither is as clear as it might be. As he notes later, quite rightly, those things classed by the Stoics as incorporeals do not, strictly speaking, exist [25]; so, as others have noted since, it is somewhat problematic to characterize the ἀρχαί as such.

How does the *Essay* stand up 50 years after its original publication? Has it been left behind by the enormous amount of scholarly work on Stoicism published since 1962? The editors clearly think not and I am inclined to agree with them. Although many details of the Stoic system have been examined in detail and filled out over the last few decades, there have been few attempts to try to make sense of Stoicism as a whole. Christensen, well aware of the wide range of textual and interpretative difficulties on which much of the recent scholarship inevitably focuses, was bold enough to put all of these to one side in order to try to grasp what we might call the central vision of Stoic philosophy, which he sees as a thorough-going process philosophy the implications of which are played out across an entire philosophical system. One consequence of this is the claim that some grasp of physics is necessary for an understanding of ethics [62], a topic that has recently received scholarly attention from Julia Annas [2007] and others. Although Christensen's *Essay* is incredibly brief, its concerns remain current within scholarship on Stoicism.

It is also worth commenting that although in many places this is a highly technical work, it remains eminently readable and Christensen often has a wonderful turn of phrase, such as 'the Stoics were too poignantly aware of the vicissitudes of life to deny the reality of change' [13] and 'Socrates is what in physics might be called a high-level tensional field' [49].

Finally, it is worth mentioning that this is a beautifully produced volume: a slim hardback printed on high quality paper and sewn into an attractive cloth binding. There are few academic presses in the English-speaking world that could match this standard of production. This makes this new edition of Christensen's *Essay* all the more fitting as a tribute to a teacher by his grateful and respectful pupils.

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