



The Stoics

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1. The Life of Zeno

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school of philosophy (born *circa* 340 B.C.), was a native of Citium in Cyprus. The city was Greek, but with a large Phoenician admixture. And it is curious that in this last and sternest phase of Greek thought, not the founder only, but a large proportion of the successive leaders of the school, came from this and other places having Semitic elements in them. Among these places notable as nurseries of Stoicism was Tarsus in Cilicia, the birthplace of St. Paul. The times of preparation were drawing to a close; and through these men, with their Eastern intensity and capacities of self-searching and self-abasement, the philosophy of Greece was linking itself on to the wisdom of the Hebrews.

Zeno came to Athens to study philosophy, and for twenty years he was a pupil first of Crates the Cynic, and then of other teachers. At length he set up a school of his own in the celebrated *Stoa Poecile* (Painted Colonnade), so named because it was adorned with frescoes by Polygnotus. There he taught for nearly sixty years, and voluntarily ended his life when close on a century old. His life, as Antigonus, King of Macedon, recorded on his tomb, was consistent with his doctrine—abstemious, frugal, laborious, dutiful. He was succeeded by Cleanthes, a native of Assos in Asia Minor. But the great constructor of the Stoic doctrine, without whom, as his contemporaries said, there had been no Stoic school at all, was Chrysippus, a native of Soli or of Tarsus in Cilicia. He wrote at enormous length, supporting his teachings by an immense erudition, and culling liberally from the poets to illustrate and enforce his views. Learned and pedantic, his works had no inherent attraction, and nothing of them but fragments has been preserved. We know the Stoic doctrine mainly from the testimony and criticisms of later times.

2. Stoic Philosophy

Like the Epicureans, Zeno and his successors made philosophy primarily a search for the chief good, a doctrine of practice and morals. But like them they were impelled to admit a logic and a physics, at least by way of preliminary basis to their ethics. The relations of the three they illustrated by various images. Philosophy was like an animal; logic was its bones and sinews, ethics its flesh, physics its life or soul. Or again, philosophy was an egg; logic was the shell, ethics the white, physics, the yolk. Or again, it was a fruitful field; logic was the hedge, ethics the crop, physics the soil. Or it was a city, well ordered and strongly fortified, and so on. The images seem somewhat confused, but the general idea is clear enough. Morality was the essential, the living body, of philosophy; physics supplied its raw material, or the conditions under which a moral life could be lived; logic secured that we should use that material rightly and wisely for the end desired.

Logic the Stoics divided into two parts—Rhetoric, the ‘science of the open hand,’ and Dialectic, the ‘science of the closed fist,’ as Zeno called them. They indulged in elaborate divisions

and subdivisions of each, with which we need not meddle. The only points of interest to us are contained in their analysis of the processes of perception and thought. A sensation, Zeno taught, was the result of an external *impulse*, which when combined with an internal *assent*, produced a mental state that revealed at the same time itself and the external object producing it. The perception thus produced he compared to the grip which the hand took of a solid object; and real perceptions, those, that is, which were caused by a real external object, and not by some illusion, always testified to the reality of their cause by this sensation of ‘grip.’

The internal assent of the mind was voluntary, and at the same time necessary; for the mind could not do otherwise than will the acceptance of that which it was fitted to receive. The peculiarity of their physics, which we shall have to refer to later on, namely, the denial of the existence of anything not material, implied that in some way there was a material action of the external object on the structure of the perceiving mind (itself also material). What exactly the nature of this action was the Stoics themselves were not quite agreed. The idea of an ‘impression’ such as a seal makes upon wax was a tempting one, but they had difficulty in comprehending how there could be a multitude of different impressions on the same spot without effacing each other. Some therefore preferred the vaguer and safer expression, ‘modification’; had they possessed our modern science, they might have illustrated their meaning by reference to the phenomena of magnetism or electricity.

An interesting passage may be quoted from Plutarch on the Stoic doctrine of knowledge: “The Stoics maintain,” he says, “that when a human being is born, he has the governing part of his soul like a sheet of paper ready prepared for the reception of writing, and on this the soul inscribes in succession its various ideas. The first form of the writing is produced through the senses. When we perceive, for example, a white object, the recollection remains when the object is gone. And when many similar recollections have accumulated, we have what is called *experience*. Besides the ideas which we get in this natural and quite undesigned way, there are other ideas which we get through teaching and information. In the strict sense only these latter ought to be called ideas; the former should rather be called perceptions. Now the rational faculty, in virtue of which we are called reasoning beings, is developed out of, or over and beyond, the mass of perceptions, in the second seven years’ period of life. In fact a thought may be defined as a kind of mental image, such as a rational animal alone is capable of having.”

Thus there are various gradations of mental apprehensions; first, those of sensible qualities obtained through the action of the objects and the assent of the perceiving subject, as already described; then by experience, by comparison, by analogy, by the combinations of the reasoning faculty, further and more general notions are arrived at, and conclusions formed, as, for example, that the gods exist and exercise a providential care over the world. By this faculty also the wise man ascends to the apprehension of the good and true.

The physics of the Stoics started from the fundamental proposition that in the universe of things there were two elements—the active and the passive. The latter was Matter or unqualified existence; the former was the reason or qualifying element in Matter, that is, God, who being eternal, is the fashioner of every individual thing throughout the universe of matter. God is One; He is Reason, and Fate, and Zeus. In fact all the gods are only various representations of His faculties and powers. He being from the beginning of things by Himself, turneth all existence through air to water. And even as the genital seed is enclosed in the semen, so also was the seed of the world concealed in the water, making its matter apt for the further birth of things; then first it brought into being the four elements—fire, water, air, earth. For there was a finer fire or air which was the moving spirit of things; later and lower than this were the material elements of fire and air. It follows that the universe of things is threefold; there is first God Himself, the source of all character and individuality, who is indestructible and eternal, the fashioner of all

things, who in certain cycles of ages gathers up all things into Himself, and then out of Himself brings them again to birth; there is the matter of the universe whereon God works; and thirdly, there is the union of the two. Thus the world is governed by reason and forethought, and this reason extends through every part, even as the soul or life extends to every part of us. The universe therefore is a living thing, having a soul or reason in it. This soul or reason one teacher likened to the air, another to the sky, another to the sun. For the soul of nature is, as it were, a finer air or fire, having a power of creation in it, and moving in an ordered way to the production of things.

The universe is one and of limited extension, being spherical in form, for this is the form which best adapts itself to movement. Outside this universe is infinite bodiless space; but within the universe there is no empty part; all is continuous and united, as is proved by the harmony of relation which exists between the heavenly bodies and those upon the earth. The world as such is destructible, for its parts are subject to change and to decay; yet is this change or destruction only in respect of the qualities imposed upon it from time to time by the Reason inherent in it; the mere unqualified Matter remains indestructible.

In the universe evil of necessity exists; for evil being the opposite of good, where no evil is there no good can be. For just as in a comedy there are absurdities, which are in themselves bad, but yet add a certain attraction to the poem as a whole, so also one may blame evil regarded in itself, yet for the whole it is not without its use. So also God is the cause of death equally with birth; for even as cities when the inhabitants have multiplied overmuch, remove their superfluous members by colonisation or by war, so also is God a cause of destruction. In man in like manner good cannot exist save with evil; for wisdom being a knowledge of good and evil, remove the evil and wisdom itself goes. Disease and other natural evils, when looked at in the light of their effects, are means not of evil but of good; there is throughout the universe a balance and interrelation of good and evil. Not that God hath in Himself any evil; the law is not the cause of lawlessness, nor God Himself responsible for any violation of right.

The Stoics indulged in a strange fancy that the world reverted after a mighty cycle of years in all its parts to the same form and structure which it possessed at the beginning, so that there would be once more a Socrates, a Plato, and all the men that had lived, each with the same friends and fellow-citizens, the same experiences, and the same endeavours. At the termination of each cycle there was a burning up of all things, and thereafter a renewal of the great round of life.

Nothing incorporeal, they maintained, can be affected by or affect that which is corporeal; body alone can affect body. The soul therefore must be corporeal. Death is the separation of soul from body, but it is impossible to separate what is incorporeal from body; therefore, again, the soul must be corporeal. In the belief of Cleanthes, the souls of all creatures remained to the next period of cyclic conflagration; Chrysippus believed that only the souls of the wise and good remained.

3. Stoic Ethics

Coming finally to the Ethics of the Stoic philosophy, we find for the chief end of life this definition, 'A life consistent with itself,' or, as it was otherwise expressed, 'A life consistent with Nature.' The two definitions are really identical; for the law of nature is the law of our nature, and the reason in our being the reason which also is in God, the supreme Ruler of the universe. This is substantially in accordance with the celebrated law of right action laid down by Kant, "Act so that the maxim of thine action be capable of being made a law of universal action." Whether a man act thus or no, by evil if not by good the eternal law will satisfy itself; the question is of

import only for the man's own happiness. Let his will accord with the universal will, then the law will be fulfilled, and the man will be happy. Let his will resist the universal will, then the law will be fulfilled, but the man will bear the penalty. This was expressed by Cleanthes in a hymn which ran somewhat thus—

Lead me, O Zeus most great,
And thou, Eternal Fate:
What way soe'er thy will doth bid me travel
That way I'll follow without fret or cavil.
Or if I evil be
And spurn thy high decree,
Even so I still shall follow, soon or late.

Thus in the will alone consists the difference of good or ill for us; in either case Nature's great law fulfils itself infallibly. To their view on this point we may apply the words of Hamlet: "If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come; the *readiness* is all."

This universal law expresses itself in us in various successive manifestations. From the moment of birth it implants in us a supreme self-affection, whereby of infallible instinct we seek our own self-preservation, rejoice in that which is suitable to our existence, shrink from that which is unsuitable. As we grow older, further and higher principles manifest themselves—reason and reflection, a more and more careful and complete apprehension of that which is honourable and advantageous, a capacity of choice among goods. Till finally the surpassing glory of that which is just and honourable shines out so clear upon us, that any pain or loss is esteemed of no account, if only we may attain to that. Thus at last, by the very law of our being, we come to know that nothing is truly and absolutely good but goodness, nothing absolutely bad but sin. Other things, inasmuch as they have no character of moral good } or moral evil, cannot be deemed really good or bad; in comparison with the absolutely good, they are things indifferent, though in comparison with each other they may be relatively preferable or relatively undesirable. Even pleasure and pain, so far as concerns the absolute end or happiness of our being, are things indifferent; we cannot call them either good or evil. Yet have they a relation to the higher law, for the consciousness of them was so implanted in us at the first that our souls by natural impulse are drawn to pleasure, while they shrink from pain as from a deadly enemy. Wherefore reason neither can nor ought to seek wholly to eradicate these primitive and deep-seated affections of our nature; but so to exercise a resisting and ordering influence upon them, as to render them obedient and subservient to herself.

That which is absolutely good—wisdom, righteousness, courage, temperance—does good only and never ill to us. All other things,—life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation, birth,—and their opposites,—death, disease, pain, deformity, weakness, poverty, contempt, humility of station,—these are in themselves neither a benefit nor a curse. They may do us good, they may do us harm. We may use them for good, we may use them for evil.

Thus the Stoics worked out on ideal and absolute lines the thought of righteousness as the chief and only good. Across this ideal picture were continually being drawn by opponents without or inquirers within, clouds of difficulty drawn from real experience. 'What,' it was asked, 'of *progress* in goodness? Is this a middle state between good and evil; or if a middle state between good and evil be a contradiction, in terms, how may we characterise it?' Here the wiser teachers had to be content to answer that it *tended* towards good, was good in possibility, would be absolutely good when the full attainment came, and the straining after right had been

swallowed up in the perfect calm of settled virtue.

‘How also of the wise man tormented by pain, or in hunger and poverty and rags, is his perfectness of wisdom and goodness really sufficient to make him happy?’ Here, again, the answer had to be hesitating and provisional, through no fault of the Stoics. In this world, while we are still under the strange dominion of time and circumstance, the ideal can never wholly fit the real. There must still be difficulty and incompleteness here, only to be solved and perfected ‘when iniquity shall have an end.’ Our eyes may fail with looking upward, yet the upward look is well; and the jibes upon the Stoic ‘king in rags’ that Horace and others were so fond of, do not affect the question. It may have been, and probably often was, the case that Stoic teachers were apt to transfer to themselves personally the ideal attributes, which they justly assigned to the ideal man in whom wisdom was perfected. The doctrine gave much scope for cant and mental pride and hypocrisy, as every ideal doctrine does, including the Christian. But the existence of these vices in individuals no more affected the doctrine of an ideal goodness in its Stoic form, than it does now in its Christian one. That only the good man is truly wise or free or happy; that vice, however lavishly it surround itself with luxury and ease and power, is inherently wretched and foolish and slavish;—these are things which are worth saying and worth believing, things, indeed, which the world dare not and cannot permanently disbelieve, however difficult or even impossible it may be to mark men off into two classes, the good and the bad, however strange the irony of circumstance which so often shows the wicked who ‘are not troubled as other men, neither are they plagued like other men; they have more than their heart could wish,’ while good men battle with adversity, often in vain. Still will the permanent, fruitful, progressive faith of man ‘look to the end’; still will the ideal be powerful to plead for the painful right, and spoil, even in the tasting, the pleasant wrong.

The doctrine, of course, like every doctrine worth anything, was pushed to extravagant lengths, and thrust into inappropriate quarters, by foolish doctrinaires. As that the wise man is the only orator, critic, poet, physician, nay, cobbler if you please; that the wise man knows all that is to be known, and can do everything that is worth doing, and so on. The school was often too academic, too abstract, too fond of hearing itself talk. This, alas! is what most schools are, and most schoolmasters.

Yet the Stoics were not altogether alien to the ordinary interests and duties of life. They admitted a duty of co-operating in politics, at least in such states as showed some desire for, or approach to, virtue. They approved of the wise man taking part in education, of his marrying and bringing up children, both for his own sake and his country’s. He will be ready even to ‘withdraw himself from life on behalf of his country or his friends. This ‘withdrawal,’ which was their word for suicide, came unhappily to be much in the mouths of later, and especially of the Roman, Stoics, who, in the sadness and restraint of prevailing despotism, came to thank God that no one was compelled to remain in life; he might ‘withdraw’ when the burden of life, the hopelessness of useful activity, became too great.

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