



Introduction to Roman Philosophy Frederick Meyer

THE FOUNDATIONS

The Roman Empire developed a system of laws and government which marked an important change in the history of civilization. The new system indicated that the city-state was obsolete and that the old national boundaries could no longer be maintained. While the Greeks had never been able to form a unified government, the Romans developed a world state which included a variety of races, all united under definite laws and Roman sovereignty.

The secret of Roman success lies not so much in Rome's military power as in the establishment of a unified system of laws. Roman law did not vanish with the collapse of the empire; even today many of the law courts of Europe, Latin America, and South Africa reflect the influence of Roman legal codes. At first, Roman law was unwritten; most of it dealt with religious usages. Then it was changed into civil law. In 449 B.C. concessions were made to the lower classes (the plebeians), and the civil law was written down in the Laws of the Twelve Tables.

As the Roman Empire expanded, these laws were applied to other Mediterranean nations. Thus, there developed the *jus gentium*, which was extended to the states conquered by Rome. Finally, during the period of the empire, the jurists systematized legal usages. Influenced by Stoic precepts, they emphasized natural law, which held that all men, regardless of origin, have certain innate rights and privileges and that all legal procedures should be guided by respect for the dignity of the human being. Between 528 and 534 A.D. Justinian codified the Roman Law, thus preserving it for modern times.

Behind this system of law lay a definite philosophy of government. The Roman state was able to expand so rapidly because, at least in early times, the individual subordinated himself to the welfare of the nation. Consequently, in Rome there was far less individualism than in Greece. Roman political theory stressed the need for a careful division in governmental responsibility. In other words, the legislative, judicial, and executive bodies of the government were separated.

Yet as Rome became stronger, class warfare became more pronounced. Reformers arose, like the Gracchi brothers, who wanted a better deal for the masses and therefore urged social and economic legislation; but they were defeated by the wealthy. By the end of the 2nd century B.C. the Roman government was in the hands of a small minority of opulent individuals, while the bulk of the people had no land and were suffering economic privations. Thus arose a shiftless proletarian class which had no interest in a stable government and was frequently led by demagogues who made extravagant promises.

The civil war between Marius and Sulla was more than a conflict of personalities. Marius represented the people, whereas Sulla championed the propertied interests. When Sulla was victorious, he instituted a reign of terror in Rome during which many lost their lives. The leaders of the common people were slaughtered.

Under Julius Caesar the first steps in the direction of totalitarianism were taken. He

decreased the power of the senate and centralized governmental administration. His work was carried on by Augustus, who strengthened one-man government and tried to restore the old concepts of Roman piety. His descendants, however, did not live up to his ideals. One was Caligula, a madman; another was Nero, who distinguished himself by burning Rome, by wholesale murder in his family, and by persecution of the Christians.

In 69 A.D. a new family, that of the Flavian emperors, took over. They strengthened the Roman monarchy and improved empire administration. At the same time they tried to secure the frontiers against the barbarian invasions. Now emperor worship became part of the Roman system of government.

The Flavian emperors were followed by the Antonines. Gibbon maintained that in this period Rome reached its climax, but perhaps Gibbon overidealized the reign of the Antonines. Three emperors especially were eminent in this period— Trajan, who expanded the Roman empire; Hadrian, who strengthened the internal administration of Rome; and Aiacus Aurelius, who ruled as a philosopher-king.

During the next century the empire was convulsed by revolution and weakened by the growing power of the army. Diocletian and Constantine tried to stem the tide, but their efforts were in vain. The pressure of the barbarians became more pronounced; economic conditions grew more desperate; inflation was rampant; and political authority was weakened by public irresponsibility.

The decline of the Roman spirit did not occur suddenly but was the result of a gradual change. Tacitus, who wrote at the close of the 1st century A.D., already realized how Rome had altered. He compared the virtues of the Germans with the moral lethargy of the Roman citizens. The Roman family was disintegrating, he wrote, and young men had a passion for unusual vices instead of simple virtues, and were perverted by a philosophy of extreme hedonism.

It is quite certain that the Roman spirit was undermined by contact with Oriental ideals. From it arose the deification of the emperor, the decline of public morals, and the disregard of citizenship. The vices which came to Rome made for effeminacy in character. Many Roman citizens were so dedicated to sensual pleasures that they had no interest in the affairs of their government.

In inheriting Greek culture the Romans did not receive an unmixed blessing. Greek studies became fashionable in society, but in taking up Greek literature many of the youth of Rome were led away from public duties and, instead, devoted themselves to philosophical speculation. It has frequently been pointed out that the Romans lacked originality in their speculation. Like modern Americans, they borrowed and imitated alien ideas. However, they did not assimilate them.

It can be readily understood that the Romans were far more skillful in applying their ideas than in developing new theories. They definitely lacked spiritual depth, and thus they were in constant danger of becoming intellectual parasites. Frequently in Roman literature we find a spirit of satiety which indicates an immense weariness.

To some extent, the Romans were blessed with too many material goods, and thus they could not sufficiently appreciate the realm of the spirit. On the other hand, as Roman history developed, there arose a vast class which was denied any material privileges and was consequently ready to succumb to any type of superstition. In short, Roman culture provided for a multitude of contradictions which, in the long run, led to the downfall of the empire.

ROMAN LITERATURE

Conventionally, Roman literature is divided into three periods. The first is the formative

period, which lasted from approximately 300 to 100 B.C. It was marked by the development of comedy, especially by Plautus, who had a Rabelaisian sense of humor; and by Terence, who was more sophisticated and unlike Plautus did not appeal to the common people.

The second period is regarded as the height of Roman literature. Under the republic it saw the emergence of such outstanding writers as Catullus, Lucretius, Cicero, and Julius Caesar. Catullus specialized in love poems, which have seldom been surpassed in intensity of feeling and depth of passion. Representative is his poem Love is all:

Let us, Lesbia darling, still
Live our life, and love our fill;
Heeding not a jot, howe'er
Churlish dotards chide or stare!
Suns go down, but 'tis to rise
Brighter in the morning skies;
But when sets our httle light.
We must sleep in endless night.
A thousand kisses grant me, sweet;
With a hundred these complete;
Lip me a thousand more, and then
Another hundred give again.
A thousand add to these, anon
A hundred more, then hurry one
Kiss after kiss without cessation.
Until we lose all calculation;
So envy shall not mar our blisses
By numbering up our tale of kisses.

Lucretius and Cicero devoted themselves mainly to philosophy, while Julius Caesar became his own historian in Commentaries on the Gallic wars.

In the second period of this Golden Age we find another group of notable writers. Vergil is known to every schoolboy as the author of the Aeneid, which describes the triumphs of Rome and is expressive of the spirit of patriotism. Vergil celebrated the advantages of rural life in the Georgics and showed that country life is more serene than an urban existence.

Horace, who satirized Roman society, was a realistic critic of the social system of his time. His major contribution was in the development of lyrical odes.

Ovid was occupied with classical theology in his more serious moments; and in a lighter vein he dedicated himself to the problems of love, which he described in a completely natural manner.

Historical writing in this period was advanced by Livy, who believed that Rome was faced with disintegration. Through his writing he attempted to awaken a new sense of social responsibility and patriotism in the Roman citizen.

After Livy, Roman literature declined and finally entered the third period, the Silver Age (14-117 A.D.). Among the writers of this age were Seneca, the great Stoic philosopher; Martial, who used the epigram to describe the corruption of the society of his day; Juvenal, who satirized with a sense of futility; and Tacitus, a master stylist, who, through his Germania, tried to halt the decay of Roman society.

After this period Roman literature produced only mediocre figures. A religious tone, which found its climactic expression in *The consolation of philosophy* by Boethius, came more and more to prevail.

In general, Roman literature is not distinguished by originality. Borrowing freely from

Greek models, it specialized in epic tales. It lacks the cosmic perspective of such dramatists as Aeschylus and Sophocles. It does not always adhere to the canons of good taste. It is often governed by didactic purposes instead of being concerned with an objective and universal account of life.

CICERO

The eclecticism of the Roman spirit is well represented by Cicero. He was so deeply impressed by the conflict existing among the various philosophical systems that he felt no intellectual certainty could be achieved. Hence, he relied on probability as his guide.

He tried to combine the features of the various philosophies, thus creating a mixture of Skepticism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism:

If it is a considerable matter to understand any one of the systems of philosophy singly, how much harder is it to master them all! Yet this is the task that confronts those whose principle is to discover the truth by the method of arguing both for and against all the schools. In an undertaking so extensive and so arduous, I do not profess to have attained success, though I do claim to have attempted it. At the same time it would be impossible for the adherents of this method to dispense altogether with any standard of guidance. This matter it is true I have discussed elsewhere more thoroughly; but some people are so dull and slow of apprehension that they appear to require repeated explanations. Our position is not that we hold that nothing is true, but that we assert that all true sensations are associated with false ones so closely resembling them that they contain no infallible mark to guide our judgment and assent. From this followed the corollary, that many sensations are probable, that is, though not amounting to a full perception they are yet possessed of a certain distinctness and clearness, and so can serve to direct the conduct of the wise man (*On the nature of the gods*, Bk 1)

In his religious doctrines Cicero firmly believed in the innate idea of God and rejected the mechanistic world-view of the Epicureans. Like the Stoics, he affirmed a belief in Providence and the government of the universe by divine design. Still, he did not believe in divination and had only contempt for oracles and sacrifices and poked fun at the cult of astrology. He thought the soul immortal, though in his private letters he did not touch upon life after death.

In his ethical system he did not agree with the Stoics that self-sufficiency is the end of life. He was too practical and had read too much of Plato and Aristotle. Thus he felt that external goods contribute to man's perfection.

In his political theories Cicero spoke of universal citizenship. He made much of the concept of natural law, which he regarded as the foundation of political authority. Because of natural law, he thought all men have definite rights and privileges. He made it clear that the state must be founded upon ethical authority and cannot be an end in itself. Among the various forms of government he preferred monarchy. His second choice was aristocracy. As for democracy, he had no sympathy whatsoever with this form of government.

SENECA

More significant than Cicero's work is the philosophy of Seneca. He was born in 4 B.C. in Spain. Receiving an excellent education in his youth, he absorbed both Stoicism and Pythagoreanism. His father was extremely wealthy, and Seneca, through financial manipulations, added to the family fortune. For eight years he was exiled on the island of

Corsica, but in 48 A.D. he was called back to become the tutor of Nero. Evidently he did not succeed too well in his system of education, for Nero was one of the worst rulers in Roman history. Eventually he incurred the enmity of his pupil, who charged that he had plotted against his life. Seneca, knowing what would result, chose the most graceful way out—suicide. In the final moments of his life he did not lose composure but remained calm and tranquil.

In Seneca's character we find strange contradictions. On the one hand, he possessed immense wealth; but on the other hand, he said a great deal about the advantages of poverty. It may be said to his credit, however, that he always lived simply and practiced the tenets of humanitarianism.

Among his works, especially impressive is a letter which he wrote to his mother during the first year of his exile. In it he told her that his miseries, after all, were not so great and that she should not grieve on his account. He had learned to find satisfaction and happiness in eternal things instead of relying on the fickle benefits of fortune. He had never been overcome by his prosperity, he wrote, and so now he could not be overwhelmed by his exile. To some extent, he was finding advantages in his fate, for now he had real leisure and could contemplate life objectively. He continued by pointing out that man needs very little to be happy. We are rich or poor not because of external advantages but because of the desires of the soul. The early Romans, he reminded his mother, had been poor, yet had they not lived a more heroic existence? Nor was he worried, so he told her, about public disgrace, for, after all, he had to be the judge of his own actions. He would be answerable for them. He reminded her that there are many sources of consolation. She should think of him as happy and cheerful and not worry about him. Above all, he advised her to study philosophy in order to heal her wounds and cure her sickness. Philosophy, he was certain, would banish all anxiety, all sorrow, and all distress.

Among the works of Seneca we find: *On anger*, *On the brevity of life*, *On the tranquillity of the soul*, *On clemency*, *On the constancy of the sage*, *On benefits*, *On providence*, *On a happy life*. The last treatise is especially revealing. The first chapter starts by showing that the happy life is not to be gained by searching for material advantages.

In his concept of education, Seneca neglected the sciences. He had little use for rhetoric, and he regarded the study of literature as academic. On the other hand, he had a high respect for philosophic discipline.

Seneca divided philosophy into three parts: moral, natural, and rational.

The first concerns our manners; the second searches the works of Nature; and the third furnishes us with propriety of words and arguments, and the faculty of distinguishing, that we may not be imposed upon with tricks and fallacies. The causes of things fall under natural philosophy, arguments under rational, and actions under moral. Moral philosophy is again divided into matter of justice, which arises from the estimation of things and of men; and into affections and actions; and a failing in any one of these disorders all the rest: for what does it profit us to know the true value of things if we be transported by our passions? or to master our appetites without understanding the when, the what, the how, and other circumstances of our proceedings? For it is one thing to know the rate and dignity of things, and another to know the little nicks and springs of acting. Natural philosophy is conversant about things corporeal and incorporeal; the disquisition of causes and effects, and the contemplation of the cause of causes. Rational philosophy is divided into logic and rhetoric; the one looks after words, sense, and order; the other treats barely of words, and the significations of them. Socrates places all philosophy in morals; and wisdom in the distinguishing of good and evil. It is the art and law of life, and it teaches us what to do in all cases,

and, like good marksmen, to hit the white at any distance (*On a happy life*, ch 4).

He advocated the virtue of self-examination. Every night, he advised, we should ask ourselves searching questions. If we do this, we will have fewer vices and achieve peace of mind.

Seneca appealed to Providence, for he regarded God as a father who is concerned with all his children:

He keeps a strict hand over those that he loves, and by the rest he does as we do by our slaves; he lets them go on in license and boldness. As the master gives his most hopeful scholars the hardest lessons, so does God deal with the most generous spirits; and the cross encounters of fortune we are not to look upon as a cruelty but as a contest: the familiarity of dangers brings us to the contempt of them, and that part is strongest which is most exercised: the seaman's hand is callous, the soldier's arm is strong, and the tree that is most exposed to the wind takes the best root: there are people that live in a perpetual winter, in extremity of frost and penury, where a cave, a lock of straw, or a few leaves, is all their covering, and wild beasts their nourishment; all this by custom is not only made tolerable, but when it is once taken up upon necessity, by little and little, it becomes pleasant to them. Why should we then count that condition of life a calamity which is the lot of many nations? There is no state of life so miserable but there are in it remissions, diversions, nay, and delights too; such is the benignity of Nature toward us, even in the severest accidents of human life....So that we should not only submit to God, but assent to him, and obey him out of duty, even if there were no necessity (*On a happy life*, ch 8).

Throughout this book Seneca indicated the disadvantages of the sensual life and castigated the Romans for making so many provisions for their bellies and paying so little attention to their virtues. Such sensuality can have no beneficial results, he averred; it can only undermine the body and lead to disease and infirmity. What, then, are the results of luxury? First, it leads to superfluity; then to wickedness; and finally men become slaves to their appetites.

He reminded us not to judge harshly the faults of others but to be conscious of our own shortcomings. He taught the virtue of mutual co-operation and the need for living for one another. Disregarding national boundaries, he spoke of one human society in which all are equal under the providence of God.

EPICETETUS

Unlike Seneca, Epictetus was not blessed by material advantages, for he was a slave and suffered all his life from ill health. He attended Epaphroditus, one of the freedmen of Nero, who allowed him to be instructed in philosophy and later emancipated him from slavery. When the Stoic philosophers were banished by Domitian, Epictetus was included among them. He went to Nicopolis, where he opened a school in which he taught until he died.

The central doctrine of Epictetus is faith in God. He constantly spoke about the works of Providence.

And what words are sufficient to praise them and set them forth according to their worth? For if we had understanding, ought we to do anything else both jointly and severally than to sing hymns and bless the deity, and to tell of his benefits? Ought we not when we are digging and ploughing and eating to sing this hymn to God?

‘Great is God, who has given us such implements with which we shall cultivate the earth: great is God who has given us hands, the power of swallowing, a stomach, imperceptible growth, and the power of breathing while we sleep.’ This is what we ought to sing on every occasion, and to sing the greatest and most divine hymn for giving us the faculty of comprehending these things and using a proper way. Well then, since most of you have become blind, ought there not to be some man to fill this office, and on behalf of all to sing the hymn to God? For what else can I do, a lame old man, than sing hymns to God? If then I was a nightingale, I would do the part of a nightingale. If I were a swan, I would do like a swan. But now I am a rational creature, and I ought to praise God: this is my work; I do it, nor will I desert this post, so long as I am allowed to keep it; and I exhort you to join in this same song (*Discourses*, Bk 1, ch. 16).

We must realize, Epictetus wrote, that the spirit of God is within each one of us. Thus we must strive to uphold the dignity of the divine force.

He taught a philosophy of consolation.

Never say about anything, I have lost it, but say I have restored it. Is your child dead? It has been restored. Is your wife dead? She has been restored. Has your estate been taken from you? Has not then this also been restored? But he who has taken it from me is a bad man. But what is it to you, by whose hands the giver demanded it back? So long as he may allow you, take care of it as a thing which belongs to another, as travelers do with their inn (*Encheiridion* 9).

Epictetus counsels us to behave in life as if we were attending a banquet:

Suppose that something is carried round and is opposite to you. Stretch out your hand and take a portion with decency. Suppose that it passes by you. Do not detain it. Suppose that it is not yet come to you. Do not send your desire forward to it, but wait till it is opposite to you. Do so with respect to children, so with respect to a wife, so with respect to magisterial offices, so with respect to wealth, and you will be some time a worthy partner of the banquets of the gods. But if you take none of the things which are set before you, and even despise them, then you will be not only a fellow banqueter with the gods, but also a partner with them in power (*Encheiridion* 15).

He reminds us that we are actors in a play and advises us to play our roles well. If we are put into this life as magistrates, we must exercise justice in our decisions. If we are paralyzed physically, we must not complain of an unhappy lot. It is not our task to select the part which has been given to us by God, who governs everything in the universe.

Epictetus believed the Golden Rule to be a valid precept for life.

When any person treats you ill or speaks ill of you, remember that he does this or says this because he thinks that it is his duty. It is not possible then for him to follow that which seems right to you, but that which seems right to himself. Accordingly, if he is wrong in his opinion, he is the person who is hurt, for he is the person who has been deceived; for if a man shall suppose the true conjunction to be false, it is not the conjunction which is hindered, but the man who has been deceived about it. If you proceed then from these opinions, you will be mild in temper to him who reviles you: for say on each occasion. It seemed so to him.

Everything has two handles, the one by which it may be borne, the other by which

it may not. If your brother acts unjustly, do not lay hold of the act by that handle wherein he acts unjustly, for this is the handle which cannot be borne; but lay hold of the other, that he is your brother, that he was nurtured with you, and you will lay hold of the thing by that handle by which it can be borne (*Encheiridion* 42, 43).

The moral system of Epictetus is indeed magnificent. Condemning capital punishment, he urged legal reform, so that mercy would prevail. He certainly did not believe in slavery. In all his activities, he thought he was guided by God, and his piety almost reminds us of the Christian saints.

MARCUS AURELIUS

While Epictetus was a slave, Marcus Aurelius was an emperor. He was educated in the Stoic school of philosophy and early in life was taught the virtue of simplicity. When he ascended the throne in 161 A.D., he was confronted by the rebellion of the barbarians and the insurrection of Parthia. Against his wish, he had to take command of his armies, and during the next years he tried to bring peace to the Roman Empire.

Misfortune followed him wherever he went. One of his trusted friends, Cassius, was envious for the throne and rebelled. There were ugly rumors about his wife. His family was decimated by death, and only one child remained.

As emperor, Marcus Aurelius was charitable; he always aided those who were unfortunate, and he endowed educational and philosophical institutions. His record, however, was marred by his persecution of the Christians and by his appointment of Verus as co-emperor of the East, an act which in later years led to the permanent division of the Roman Empire. His son, Commodus, distinguished himself by unusual cruelty and by inefficient and corrupt empire administration.

In spite of these reverses we must not underestimate the idealism of Marcus Aurelius. In his *Meditations* we have the portrait of a noble man, intensely earnest and forever conscious of high moral purposes. He started his *Meditations* by acknowledging his debt to his family and teachers. He was grateful that he had been imbued with a love for philosophy and was blessed by a loving family, especially by a virtuous wife. Roman gossip had it otherwise, but evidently Marcus Aurelius was not disturbed by it.

We are not to be distressed, he tells us, by meeting unpleasant people, for we must realize that all of us are made for co-operation:

Begin the morning by saying to yourself: I shall meet with the busybody, the ungrateful, arrogant, deceitful, envious, unsocial. All these ill qualities they have by reason of their ignorance of good and evil. But I, who have seen the nature of the good (that it is beautiful) and of the bad (that it is ugly) and the nature of him who does wrong . . . can neither be injured by any of them (for no one can fix on me what is ugly) nor can I be angry with my kinsman, nor hate him. We are made for co-operation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. To act against one another, then, is contrary to nature, and it is acting against one another to be vexed and to turn away (*Meditations* 2.1).

Marcus Aurelius reminds us that we may depart from life at any moment. In other words, we must regulate our thoughts and act with perfect justice. We can take comfort in the fact that the gods exist and provide for our welfare.

There are two types of knowledge: one stresses physical science, which Marcus Aurelius

regarded as quite useless; the other is concerned with virtue:

Nothing is more wretched than a man who traverses everything in a round, and pries into things beneath the earth, as the poet says, and seeks by conjecture what is in the minds of his neighbors, without perceiving that it is sufficient to attend to the spirit within him, and to reverence it sincerely. And reverence of the spirit consists in keeping it pure from passion and thoughtlessness and dissatisfaction with what comes from gods and men. For the things from the gods merit veneration for their excellence; and the things from men should be dear to us by reason of kinship; and sometimes even, in a manner, they move our pity by reason of men's ignorance of good and bad; this defect being not less than that which deprives us of the power of distinguishing things that are white and black (*Meditations* 2.13).

Life, he pointed out, is in a constant state of flux, and the body is subject to decay. We cannot rely on fame, nor can we trust in fortune. What, then, can support a man? One thing, and only one philosophy.

But this consists in keeping the spirit within a man free from violence and unharmed, superior to pains and pleasures, doing nothing without a purpose, nor yet falsely and with hypocrisy, not feeling the need of another man's doing or not doing anything; and besides, accepting all that happens, and all that is allotted, as coming from thence, wherever it is, from whence he himself came; and finally, waiting for death with a cheerful mind, as being nothing else than dissolution of the elements of which every living being is compounded. But if there is no harm to the elements themselves in each continually changing into another, why should a man have any apprehension about the change and dissolution of all the elements? For it is according to nature, and nothing is evil which is according to nature." (*Meditations* 2.17).

He counseled us to avoid all envy and suspicion and always to keep our thoughts sincere:

Do not waste the remainder of your life in thoughts about others, when you do not refer your thoughts to some object of common utility. For you lose the opportunity of doing something else when you have such thoughts as these: 'What is such a person doing, and why, and what is he saying, and what is he thinking of, and what is he contriving?' and whatever else of the kind makes us wander away from the observation of our own ruling power. We ought then to check in the series of our thoughts everything that is without a purpose and useless, but most of all the over-curious feeling and the malignant; and a man should accustom himself to think of those things only about which if one should suddenly ask, 'What have you now in your thoughts?' with perfect openness you might immediately answer, this or that; so that from your words it should be plain that everything in you is simple and benevolent, and such as befits a social animal, one that cares not for thoughts about pleasure or sensual enjoyments at all, nor has any rivalry or envy and suspicion, or anything else for which you would blush if you should say that you had it in your mind (*Meditations* 3.4).

We cannot find tranquility, according to Marcus Aurelius, by seeking retreats in the country or by visiting the seashore.

But this is altogether a mark of the most common sort of men, for it is in your power

whenever you shall choose to retire into yourself. For nowhere, either with more quiet or more freedom from trouble, does a man retire than into his own soul, particularly when he has within him such thoughts that by looking into them he is immediately in perfect tranquility; and I affirm that tranquility is nothing else than the good ordering of the mind. Constantly then give to yourself this retreat, and renew yourself; and let your principles be brief and fundamental, which, as soon as you shall recur to them, will be sufficient to cleanse the soul completely, and to send you back free from all discontent with the things to which you return (*Meditations* 4.3).

We are to turn our thoughts to universal things; thus we fulfill our function as human beings:

In the morning when you rise unwillingly, let this thought be present: I am rising to the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bedclothes and keep myself warm?— But this is more pleasant.— Do you exist then to take your pleasure, and not at all for action or exertion? Do you not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And are you unwilling to do the work of a human being, and do you not make haste to do that which is according to your nature? (*Meditations* 5.1).

While the final tone of Marcus Aurelius is melancholy, it contains a trace of hope. We are infinitesimal— our hope lies in living according to nature.

What do you wish? To continue to exist? Well, do you wish to have sensation? Movement? Growth? And then again to cease to grow? To use speech? To think? What is there of all these things which seem to you worth desiring? But if it is easy to set little value on all these things, turn to that which remains, which is to follow reason and God. But it is inconsistent with honoring reason and God to be troubled because by death a man will be deprived of the other things.

How small a part of the boundless and unfathomless time is assigned to every man! It is very soon swallowed up in the eternal. And how small a part of the whole substance! And how small a part of the universal soul! And on what a small clod of the whole earth you creep! Reflecting on all this, consider nothing to be great, except to act as your nature leads you, and to endure that which the common nature brings (*Meditations* 12.31-32).

Marcus Aurelius did not believe in immortality. His ethical system was not buttressed by the hope of life after death. An immense weariness prevails in his speculations. We have almost the feeling that Roman speculation had exhausted itself.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ROMAN STOICISM

In summarizing the contributions of Stoicism, we find that it had an enormous impact on both ancient and modern civilization. Stoicism was not merely a system of theoretical speculation but a practical philosophy which changed the existing social institutions.

(1) Stoicism upheld the validity of natural law through which all men are equal and all men share basic rights.

(2) Stoicism portrayed the ideal traits of the Roman character, such as self-control,

soberness, temperance, and dignity under all circumstances. It made the Roman character more humanitarian, especially through its attitude toward slavery and social amusements.

(3) Stoicism proclaimed the supremacy of reason. Man, thus, could best find himself by following his rational capacity and adhering to his sense of duty. Thus Stoicism anticipated the emergence of idealism, which we find later in the Kantian philosophy.

(4) Stoicism paved the way for the acceptance of Christianity. In fact, Stoicism markedly influenced the work of St. Paul, the greatest of the Christian apostles. Like Christianity, Stoicism preached the doctrine of love and universal co-operation, but the essential difference between Stoicism and Christianity lies in the secular outlook of the Stoic thinkers. Generally their moral doctrines were not buttressed by a belief in immortality. Also, Stoicism regarded apathy as the highest virtue whereas Christianity teaches a full expression of emotions.

We must not neglect, however, some of the negative aspects of the Stoic gospel. Its antiscientific bias, its rejection of the heliocentric theory, its stress on austerity, its opposition to pleasure—all these views hindered the development of a balanced philosophical attitude. From a scientific standpoint Epicurean philosophy was far superior to Stoicism, for it avoided the concept of design, was less anthropomorphic, and gave a systematic and natural account of the universe.

Still, we must not underestimate the contribution of Stoicism to philosophy and civilization. Seldom have moral teachings been explained so fervently and so impressively as they were by such thinkers as Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Their books will always remain as milestones of Roman civilization, as symbols of an unconquerable faith, and as expressions of the greatness of a genuine morality.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can the strength of Roman civilization be explained?
2. What were the major contributions of Rome to world civilization?
3. Describe the spirit of Roman literature.
4. How can happiness be achieved, according to Seneca?
5. How did Seneca criticize contemporary Roman society?
6. What was the view of Epictetus regarding Providence?
7. Describe the life and philosophy of Marcus Aurelius.
8. What are the conclusions of Marcus Aurelius regarding human happiness?
9. Why has Marcus Aurelius been popular in the history of philosophy?
10. What were the main interests of Roman Stoicism?

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