



The Stoics and Politics

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That philosophy could teach statesmanship was Plato's firm belief. He himself unsuccessfully attempted to guide Dionysius II at Syracuse, and members of the Academy gave advice at several less prominent places. There were monarchs who felt that philosophers had something to offer; at the lowest their presence would add lustre to the court. Philip of Macedon's motives in obtaining Aristotle as an instructor of the boy Alexander at Pella must remain as obscure as those of Alexander himself in taking Aristotle's pupil Callisthenes to Persia. When Antigonus Gonatas asked Zeno to come to Macedon, his invitation was based on real admiration; he may have hoped not only for his company but also that he would exercise a good influence on the men at court. Zeno would not go, but sent Philonides and his young pupil Persaeus, whom Antigonus in course of time made civil governor of Corinth, one of the Macedonian garrison-towns. When Corinth was captured by Aratus of Sicyon in 243 BC, he either died fighting, as some later Stoics believed, or got away in the confusion, as more hostile sources claimed. He was not the military commander, as was maliciously alleged later, and nothing is known of his administration. But he wrote a book on kingship, another about the Spartan constitution, and a long attack on Plato's Laws. Soon after the fall of Corinth another of Zeno's pupils, Sphaerus, already an old man, went to Sparta, where he tried to influence the young; he was admired by Cleomenes, who came to the throne in 235, and became associated with him in his reforms. He is also said to have been invited to the court of Ptolemy IV Philopator in Egypt, but the truth may be that he took refuge there with Cleomenes when the latter had to leave Sparta in 221. It is possible, however, that he went earlier, at the request of Ptolemy III Euergetes, since the invitation is said to have come while Cleanthes was still alive. Chrysippus, so it is reported, then refused to go; but the refusal was not based on principle, since he regarded service with a king as a suitable source of income for a wise man.

Although these minor figures had parts in the political scene, it was remarked that neither Zeno nor Cleanthes nor Chrysippus, who all declared that a man should take part in the political life of his city, ever did anything of the kind at Athens. They were of course foreigners, but it was believed that the first two could have had citizenship if they had wanted it, and Chrysippus in fact acquired it. Perhaps they felt that there was not much they could achieve in a democracy, even in the limited democracy which was all that Athens enjoyed in much of the third century. An anecdote represents Chrysippus as answering, when asked why he took no part in political life, that bad politics would displease the gods and good politics the citizens. To act by influencing a sympathetic autocrat or powerful man might seem to offer a more effective means of doing good. Nevertheless Chrysippus said that a wise man would take part in political life, unless there was some obstacle, and that he would there speak and act as if wealth, health, and reputation were all good things. In other words, to be effective, he must use the language of his hearers.

It is not to be supposed that there was any Stoic political programme. Politics are largely concerned with obtaining or providing power, status, or material things the value of which the Stoics recognised, it is true, but depreciated. The real interest of these philosophic advisers was

with men's moral welfare, and it may be imagined that their energies were mainly devoted not to current issues but to more general preaching against fear, anger, and cupidity, in favour of self-control and philanthropy. A figure who may form a partial exception is Blossius, an Italian from Cumae and pupil of Antipater of Tarsus; it was widely said that along with one Diophanes, a rhetorician from Mytilene, he urged Tiberius Gracchus on to his land reforms. After Tiberius' death he joined Aristonicus, who was trying to maintain the independence of Pergamum, Irft to the Romans by its last king Attalus III; on the failure of this enterprise he committed suicide. It may be guessed that Blossius was politically committed, both in Rome and in Pergamum, although the only piece of advice specifically ascribed to him was a protest to Tiberius on the day of his assassination, urging him not to be intimidated by a crow that had ominously dropped a stone in front of him.

Blossius was not the first philosopher to be associated with a Roman politician. When in the later second century BC many Romans began to take an interest in Greek culture, some leading men became the patrons of Greeks whose profession was philosophy. Panaetius had by 140 BC established a firm friendship with the younger Scipio, who in that year took him as his sole companion on a mission to Alexandria and the East; through Scipio he exerted an influence on several eminent Romans, who accepted Stoicism as a guide. In the next century Cicero, although he professed to be a sceptic, took a Stoic philosopher Diodotus into his house and maintained him until he died. Even Pompey thought it proper when in the East to go and hear Posidonius at Rhodes. But the younger Cato, a declared Stoic, was the patron of at least three philosophers of that school, Antipater of Tyre, Apollonides, who was with him at his death, and Athenodorus of Tarsus, nicknamed 'Knobby', whom he induced to leave the post of librarian at Pergamum and accompany him to Rome.

Cato was a member of an old family and its traditions destined him for a political life. He attempted to conduct himself according to Stoic principles and what he regarded as old Roman standards. He lived simply and even when praetor sometimes went barefoot and without a tunic. In the anarchy of the later years of the Republic he held firm again and again to the view that the law must be respected, showing great courage in the physical dangers to which this exposed him. Admired for his financial honesty, he made enemies by his attempts to impose it on others. No doubt he was mistaken in thinking it practicable to restore respect for the law and an out-of-date constitution; too much power belonged to those whose interests lay in disregarding them. He was elected to a series of offices but failed to win the consulship. To the usual bargaining, compromising politician he would seem an obstinate doctrinaire. Yet in the final resort, if it was impossible to preserve legality, he would give in: he opposed the claims both of Caesar and of Pompey, but in the end, seeing the greater danger in Caesar and in Pompey the only means of stopping him, he accepted the latter as sole consul, unconstitutional as this was, ready to support him loyally for the time.

After Pompey's death he took some troops by a famous march across die Libyan desert to join those who were resisting Caesar in North Africa, where he handed over the command to a young Scipio who as an ex-consul outranked him. On Scipio's defeat at Thapsus Cato, who had remained at Utica, sent his senatorial friends back to Italy to make their peace but decided that he must take his own life since he could no longer live in the way appropriate for him. After reading Plato's *Phaedo*, he stabbed himself with a sword recovered with great difficulty from friends who wished to frustrate his intention. When he lost consciousness they tried to bind him up, but on coming to he tore his wounds open with his bare hands and so perished. His career and above all his death made him a hero: he had shown himself to be unconquerable by adversity. For later Roman Stoics of the upper classes he became the ideal prototype, the man who lived and died as reason and conscience dictated.

Another Athenodorus, also from Tarsus, known as ‘the Bald’, had a career worth recounting as it shows what a professional philosopher might at this time achieve. Probably a pupil of Posidonius, he was appealed to by Cicero for help with the third book of his work *On Duties*; having taught the young Octavian, the future Augustus, he became his adviser after his elevation to be head of the state; there are stories that he told him to govern his temper by saying over the letters of the alphabet before making a decision, and that he once substituted himself for a senator’s wife with whom the emperor had an assignation, emerging to the other’s consternation from her closed litter. In his later years he returned to Tarsus with a commission to change its constitution—the town was under demagogic control; he obtained for it relief from taxation and when he died was given a hero’s cult there. Another Stoic, Arius Didymus, was maintained by Augustus and befriended by Maecenas; we have extracts from his summaries of Stoic and of Peripatetic doctrines; Seneca reports that the emperor’s wife Livia had more comfort from him at the death of her son Drusus than from any other source (*Consolation to Marcia* 4).

Some wealthy Romans, it is clear, found it useful to keep a philosopher, and men of distinction did not find the position humiliating. They expected to be able to give moral advice and comfort to their patrons and their families, while their patrons could draw strength from their approval. The relation between Seneca and Nero had some similar elements, although Seneca was not only a philosopher but also a Roman, ambitious and anxious to play his own part in political life. When he found his position too difficult and attempted to retire, Nero would not let him go, stressing, if Tacitus can be believed, the value of the philosopher’s counsel and the danger to his own reputation should Seneca leave him (*Annals* 14, 55-6).

Many Romans were, however, deeply suspicious of philosophy and philosophers. Both Nero and Agricola were warned against the subject by their mothers, and other instances of criticism and prejudice would make a long catalogue. Important though the relation between some leading men and philosophers was, hostility was at least as powerful a force. No sooner had Seneca fallen from favour than an attack was made on Rubellius Plautus, like Nero a grandson of Augustus’ stepson. He was living quietly in Asia, but was said to have ‘assumed the arrogance of the Stoics, a sect that turns men into mutinous trouble-makers’. He refused to try to raise a revolt, but followed the course recommended by his attendant philosophers, Coeranus and Musonius, who advised him to meet death bravely, not to prolong life’s alarms and uncertainties. He was murdered by a centurion sent to kill him. His friend Barea Soranus, another Stoic, who had been a just governor of Asia Minor, was accused of treasonable intentions in winning the favour of the provincials, and allowed to commit suicide. The same fate befell Thræsea Paetus, a Stoic who had walked out of the senate when motions were proposed for celebrating the murder of Agrippina. For three years he did not attend its meetings, and he gathered round himself followers who imitated his austere dress and solemn face: this was represented as a challenge to the Emperor’s way of life. These self-declared champions of liberty, it was said, would overthrow the Empire, and when it was overthrown, attack the liberty of others.

It would be a mistake to treat these last accusations too seriously and to suppose that Thræsea and his friends had any thought of overthrowing the Empire or establishing a Stoic tyranny, or indeed that there was any Stoic political programme. The liberty that they claimed was not one which they lacked or of which they could be deprived: it was the liberty to act according to conscience, not freedom from the consequences of so acting. Thræsea found himself unable to join in the flatteries heaped on Nero by his fellow senators or to defend the crimes that they approved at the Emperor’s orders: he was therefore an opponent, although a passive one, of this princeps; but that did not make him an opponent of the principate. If he had had the fortune to live under the rule of Hadrian or even of Vespasian, he might have had a useful career and been

forgotten by history.

A more radical character was Helvidius Priscus, Thrasea's son-in-law, who as a young man attached himself to the Stoics, in order to carry himself firmly among the dangers of political life. He was determined always to champion what he saw as right, which included the independence of the Senate. Once he there opposed the emperor Vitellius, who attended even its less important meetings; at the accession of Vespasian his honorific speech kept within the bounds of truth; shortly afterwards, when the Capitol needed restoration, he proposed that the emperor should subsidize the empty public purse but that the Senate should retain control of the work. When an opportunity offered, he attacked Marcellus Epius, who had played a part in Thrasea's fall. He had the approval of the Senate, which was eager to punish those of its members who had profited by Nero's reign of terror, unlike Vespasian, who wished old enmities to be forgotten; Marcellus left the meeting, saying: 'I leave your Senate to you, Priscus; act the king there, in Caesar's presence.'

Helvidius was a praetor, whereas Vespasian held no magistracy; accordingly he openly criticised the emperor, treating him as if he had been an ordinary senator. He is said to have denounced monarchy and praised democracy. Rome had never known anything that we or the Greeks would have called democracy, and one may guess that if Helvidius used the word he thought that the Senate would adequately express the will of the people. The Emperor's authority was de facto rather than de jure; Helvidius seems to have had the impracticable idea that constitutional theory should prevail over the facts of power. There is no suggestion in the ancient sources that he was the leader of a party of any importance. But he was dangerous because he was a bad example; the Emperor required a subservient Senate, not an opposition.

Before long Helvidius was banished and then put to death, perhaps on the order of the Senate itself. More than that all teachers of philosophy, except Musonius, were excluded from Rome; the Stoics were denounced as self-important men who thought that a beard and rough cloak and bare feet made them wise, brave, and just, who looked down on their fellow-men, calling the well-bom spoilt children, and the base-bom men of no spirit, the beautiful indecent and the ugly gifted, the rich greedy and the poor slavish. This picture, or caricature, has some of its colour from acquaintance with Cynics, one of whom, Demetrius, was prominent at Rome at this time. They had affinities with the Stoics but were anarchists on principle, who believed that the price of happiness was to shake off man-made law and convention. In ad 75 two Cynics got back into the city: one rose in the theatre to denounce the spectators and was whipped; the second was beheaded. Under Domitian Junius Rusticus, a senator, was executed because he had praised Thrasea and Helvidius: this was made the occasion to banish all philosophers from the whole of Italy.

In the century of enlightened government that followed after Domitian's tyranny philosophers regained their old place, and were widely, although not universally, accepted as educators and advisers, and valued as guides to conduct. The emperor Hadrian probably founded professorships for philosophy, and certainly provided the young Marcus Aurelius with his first philosophic teachers. Antoninus Pius, too, brought the eminent Stoic Apollonius to Rome as the young man's instructor. There the philosopher insisted that the young prince should wait on him, not be visited in the palace. Marcus mentions among other mentors Q. Junius Rusticus, no doubt related to the man of the same name executed by Domitian, a prominent figure in public life and later to be Prefect of the City, who introduced him to Epictetus' *Discourses*, lending his own copy, and Sextus, Plutarch's nephew, but a Stoic in spite of his uncle's determined opposition to the school.

If it is asked what effect these teachers, of whom most were Stoics, had upon politics and social conditions, one cannot point to any specific piece of legislature or social change. Stoic

ethics were primarily concerned with the individual, and the object of moral teaching was to make him a better man. More and more this came to be looked on as a matter of ridding him of his passions; they were psychological diseases and the philosopher was the doctor of the soul. Stoics might hold that some men, whose social position called them to it, had the duty of playing a role in political life. When the younger Pliny complained to the respected Stoic teacher Euphrates of the burden of public duties, he was told that they were the finest part of philosophy (Letters 1.10). But Stoicism had no sort of political programme; there was only the generalised injunction to act sensibly and justly. Nor was a Stoic likely to be filled with a desire to improve men's material conditions; his principles told him that they were irrelevant to their welfare, common opinion regarded them as incapable of much improvement, and his philosophy took them to be the work of Providence.

Nevertheless Stoicism must have had some undefinable general influence that favoured conscientious administration for the benefit of the ordinary man and a humanitarianism that resulted in a little legislation and some charitable foundations. The Greco-Roman world would have been a worse place without its philosophers.

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