



Zeno: Founder of Stoicism

F. H. Sandbach

At the north-west corner of the agora, the great central square of Athens, stood the Stoa Poikile or Painted Colonnade, so called from the mural paintings by Polygnotus and other great artists of the fifth century BC that adorned it. Here, in the early part of the third century BC, could often be seen a seated figure talking to a group of listeners; his name was Zeno and his followers, first called Zenonians, were later described as ‘men from the Stoa’ or ‘Stoics’.

Zeno was not an Athenian, but the son of a merchant, Mnaseas, from Citium in Cyprus. Mnaseas, although a good Greek name, was one sometimes adopted by Phoenicians, and Citium, once a Greek colony, was now predominantly Phoenician in language, in institutions, and perhaps in population. Zeno’s contemporaries who called him a Phoenician may have been justified in so doing, but he must be imagined as growing up in an environment where Greek was important. His father is said to have brought home from Athens many ‘Socratic books’, which fired the young man’s imagination. Anecdotes of this kind were often invented in antiquity and must always be treated with some reserve, but this one at least has a certain plausibility, and may have been recorded by his pupil Persaeus, with whom he at one time shared a house.

It was as a youth of 22 (Persaeus was the authority for this) that Zeno came to Athens in the year 312 or 311 BC. There is an anecdote that he sat down by a bookseller, who was reading aloud from Book II of Xenophon’s *Reminiscences of Socrates (Memorabilia)*: he asked where men of that kind were to be found; at that moment Crates the Cynic happened to pass by, and the bookseller replied ‘Follow that man’. The story may be merely *ben trovato*, but there is no doubt that in his early years Zeno did come under Crates’ influence, and his first book, the *Republic*, was said to have been written when he was ‘backing up the dog’. ‘Cynic’ means ‘canine’, and the first dog had been Diogenes, who was given that nickname because of his shameless behaviour, and who accepted it as being the watchdog of morality. He was dead before Zeno came to Athens and Crates was the most gifted of his followers. Cynicism was hardly a philosophy; it was more an attitude and a way of life. Diogenes, who had been reduced from affluence to poverty, found a guiding light, as has been said, in the writings of Antisthenes. Right thinking, virtue, and happiness were an indissoluble trio, and material possessions irrelevant. Diogenes tried to show their importance by sleeping rough, relying on charity for his food, and having no clothes but a cloak. One of his cries was ‘Deface the currency’, that is put out of circulation the artificial coinage that passes as valuable: and rules and customs that govern our behaviour in society are nothing but a bondage to be shaken off; we should live as nature commands.

The Cynics had some admirable or at any rate attractive doctrines. To be good is all that matters; to be good brings happiness; to be wise, that is to know how to act, makes one good; one ought to live naturally, and freely. But these are isolated principles rather than a philosophic system; and they assume that anyone can see what constitutes goodness and what a natural life is. ‘Virtue’, Antisthenes had said, ‘is not a thing that needs a lot of talk’, and when asked what

was the most necessary branch of learning, he had replied ‘to unlearn your vices’. Although strongly affected by the Cynic outlook, Zeno could not remain satisfied with it and after a time he became a pupil of Polemo, a man of no great originality, who had succeeded Xenocrates as head of the Academy, the leading philosophical school of the day; here he will have got to know something of Plato’s views, as modified, developed, and organised by the master’s successors. This is the influence recognised by the scholars of antiquity, and this is the first place to look for the sources of Zeno’s thought.

Many modern writers try to find a connection with Aristotle, but this I believe to be a mistake, due to the tempting supposition that he loomed as large to the generation that succeeded him as he does to us. There is much to suggest that those works of his that are read today, works mostly not prepared for publication, sometimes barely intelligible notes, were for the most part not known until they were edited in the first century BC. There may have been private copies of some made for pupils, but they do not in general seem to have been in the book-trade or to have been part of what philosophers might be expected to read. The only books of his mentioned by early Stoics are two published works, now lost, the *Protrepticus* (*A Call to Philosophy*) and *On Justice*. It is certain that some of his ideas were accepted and used by his pupil Theophrastus, who founded the so-called Peripatetic school shortly before Zeno’s arrival in Athens; but although some knowledge of the unpublished Aristotelian doctrine may have thus reached Zeno at second-hand, there is no hint in the ancient sources that the Stoic ever listened to the Peripatetic. The foregoing sentences can give but a partial and inadequate account of the problem, but they must serve to explain why this book leaves Aristotle almost entirely out of account. It is often said that the Stoics ‘rejected’ this or that characteristically Aristotelian doctrine: it is better to say that they ignored it.

Zeno is reputed to have listened also to Diodorus ‘Cronus’ and to Stilpo, leader of the ‘Megarian school’, who were greatly interested in logical puzzles and the invention of arguments that seemed to lead to paradoxical conclusions. It was, however, probably not this that attracted Zeno, who later found the principal merit of logic in its ability to show the falsity of such constructions, but rather Stilpo’s moral teaching, which was not unlike that of the Cynics. He saw the wise man as entirely self-sufficient, needing no friends, quite independent of external possessions: no one could take from him his wisdom, and he was unaffected by the misfortunes that other men would count as evils. It is uncertain when Zeno began to talk in the Stoa or how soon his teaching had taken a form to which the name of Stoicism can properly be given. There was no formal foundation of a school, and the Stoics, unlike the other three groups, Academy, Peripatetics, and Epicureans, had no common property or legal status. One may imagine a gradual process of growth, as Zeno developed his ideas and drew to himself an increasing number of hearers, many from overseas.

The Stoa was a public place where foreigners were as welcome as citizens. But he had Athenians among his audience too. When he died in 262 the assembly passed a resolution to honour him by a tomb and by setting up inscriptions in the exercise grounds of the Academy and the Lyceum, places of education as well as sport. The decree opens with the following words:

Since Zeno of Citium, son of Mnaseas, has spent many years in the city engaged in philosophy, and in every way has always shown himself a good man, and in particular by exhorting to virtue and good behaviour the young men who came to associate with him has stimulated them to the best of conduct, exhibiting as an example to all his own way of life, which followed what he said in his talk, therefore it has seemed good to the people to praise Zeno of Citium, son of Mnaseas, and to crown him with a golden

garland, etc.

This testimonial need not be entirely disbelieved, even although the decree was proposed by one Thraso, the agent at Athens of Antigonus Gonatas, King of Macedon, who was an admirer of Zeno's, had visited him in Athens, and vainly invited him to his court. A few months before Zeno's death Athens had surrendered to Antigonus, starved out by a long siege; and the political independence, for which she had struggled ever since the defeat of Ghaeronea (336 bc), had gone, never to be recovered. Stoicism is sometimes represented as a philosophy devised to form a refuge for men disorientated by the collapse of the system of city-states, 'a shelter from the storm'. This is based on a misapprehension. The city-state had never given security, and it remained the standard primary form of social organization even after military power had passed into the hands of the great monarchies. As a corrective one may quote the words of C. Bradford Welles:

It is fantasy and perversion to see in Stoicism a new personal doctrine invented to sustain the Greeks in a cityless world of great Empires, for Hellenism was a world of cities, and Hellenistic Greeks were making money, not worrying about their souls. (*Greece and Rome*, 1965, 227.)

At Athens political life continued active and often bloody during almost the whole of Zeno's time. What is true is that during the fifty years following the death of Alexander the Great many Greeks left their own cities hoping, it may be presumed, to find a better life elsewhere. Many went to the new lands of Asia. Men who were looking for a wider cultural life than their own towns could provide would be attracted to Athens. Almost all of Zeno's followers whose origins are known were of this sort; they were people who, like him, had abandoned what rights and duties they may have had in their own cities, preferring the disadvantages of life as aliens, second-class residents, legally, politically, and socially deprived, but enjoying the stimulus of an intellectual ambience.

Some scholars have seen in the real or supposed Semitic origin of several prominent Stoics, in particular of Zeno and Chrysippus, an influence on the development of their thought. It is safer to leave this out of account. Little is known about the intellectual or religious climate in which they grew up, since it cannot have been uniform in all Semitic communities; the Jews and the Carthaginians may have had something in common, but the differences were greater. Nor is it necessary to look for some factor outside Greece: Stoicism can be adequately explained as a natural development of ideas current among the Greeks.

Zeno's first book, now lost like all his other works, was concerned with the structure of society. There has been much dispute about the intention of his *Republic*, and I give the interpretation that seems to me best to suit the evidence. It laid down how men ought to live together. Only the wise, that is those who think right and therefore act right, do what they ought. Therefore he described a society of the wise, in a sense an ideal society, but not necessarily one that he regarded as impracticable. The proposals were 'relevant to his own place and time' (Philodemus, *Against the Stoics*, xviii). He may have had a young man's optimism about the prospects of reform. Nor need he have supposed that social change must wait until all men were wise: his proposals might be practicable if they were accepted by a large majority in any one place.

To entitle his book *Politeia* (*Republic* or *Political State*) was a paradox, because he swept away everything that the Greeks regarded as characteristic of the polis or organised society. There were to be no temples, no law-courts, no 'gymnasia', no money. Wise men are friends,

and friends according to the Greek proverb, share their possessions; in a commune of friends there will be no more need for cash-transactions than inside a family. Gymnasia, not only exercise-places, but also the scene of 'higher education', were an aid to political life, which was also prosecuted in the courts of law; political struggles and legal framework have no value for men who know how to live together. Temples and statues of gods were the visible symbols of national unity; but the wise man will set no store by them, having a lofty contempt for the products of the manual workers' hands. Plutarch wrote (*Moralia* 329 A) that Zeno's *Politeia* can be summarised as saying that 'we should not live organised in cities or in demes (a subdivision of a city), each group distinguished by its own views of right, but should think all men our fellow-demesmen and fellow citizens, and that there should be one way of life and one order, like that of a flock grazing together on a common pasture' (or 'under a common law'). The word *nomas* used in the Greek can mean either 'pasture' or 'law', but even if the latter interpretation is correct, the intention was not that there should be any organised world state, but that wherever men came together they should be governed by the rule of reason, which would be the same the world over. Other reports represent Zeno as speaking of what should be done in cities; he must have meant thereby not 'political' cities, but 'physical' cities, groups of men living in the same place.

Opponents of Stoicism were to make play with Zeno's proposals in this book with regard to sex. He is said to have favoured 'community of wives' or that 'any man should lie with any woman'. This was later accepted and defended by Chrysippus, the third head of the school, who explained that the children would be cared for by their elders in general and that incest was not unnatural, being common among animals. It is likely enough that Zeno had advanced the same considerations. But his reasons for advocating this sexual permissiveness, which extended to homosexual acts, are less certain. Chrysippus was to say that community of wives would avert the jealousy caused by adultery; but a society of wise men would be in no danger of feeling jealousy. More probably Zeno took over the attitude of the Cynic Diogenes, who had in his Republic gone even further, approving all forms of coition. This had been part of his campaign to return to nature and cast off the conventions with which man had impeded himself. But to Zeno it may have seemed that in a society of wise men and wise women monogamy would serve no purpose. In actual societies marriage usually provided a home where children could be brought up, while husband and wife were a mutually supporting pair. Among the wise, however, charity would not begin at home: there benevolence would extend equally to all the human race; there would therefore be no need for the particular protection afforded by the household. In the real world in which the Stoics lived the situation was different, and marriage and the rearing of children came to be approved. Even a wise man, if there were one, some were to say, would see it as right to marry.

Of Zeno's later works little is known but the titles. These include *On the Universe*, *On Substance*, *On Vision*, but predominantly they suggest a concern with human behaviour, e.g. *On Life that accords with Nature*, *On Impulse*, *On Human Nature*, *On Passions*, *On Appropriate Action*, *On Law*, *On Greek Education*. He also wrote five books of Homeric Problems as well as about Hesiod's *Theogony*, no doubt accepting the popular view that the poets were teachers whose views were to be discovered by interpretation. At times he would rewrite verses if he disapproved their sentiment; for example he amended Sophocles' lines

'Who traffics with a tyrant is his slave.
Although he comes as free'

by writing '—is no slave, Given he comes as free'. He is also the central figure of many

anecdotes, which testify to his being a man who caught people's attention. Several show him as putting down presumptuous young men. To a talkative youth he said, 'We have one tongue and two ears to listen twice as much as we speak'. Such reproof and even more biting ones earned him a reputation for harsh severity alongside the respect that was paid to his self-control and simple manner of life.

By his oral teaching and in his written works Zeno must have laid down the outlines of the system we call Stoicism. But it is impossible to draw a firm line between his contribution and those of his successors. All that can be done in a book of this size, at least, is to give an account of orthodox Stoicism, with some reference, where the sources allow, to the founder or to other individual members of the school.

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