



The Stoics

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Zeno of Cyprus, the founder of the Stoic School, a Greek of Phoenician descent, was born about 342 B.C., and died in 270. He is said to have followed philosophy; because he lost all his property in a ship-wreck--a motive characteristic of the age. He came to Athens, and learned philosophy under Crates the Cynic, Stilpo the Megaric, and Polemo the Academic. About 300 B.C. he founded his school at the Stoa Poecile (many-coloured portico) whence the name Stoic. He died by his own hand. He was followed by Cleanthes, and then by Chrysippus, as leaders of the school. Chrysippus was a man of immense productivity and laborious scholarship. He composed over seven hundred books, but all are lost. Though not the founder, he was the chief pillar of Stoicism. The school attracted many adherents, and flourished for many centuries, not only in Greece, but later in Rome, where the most thoughtful writers, such as Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Epictetus, counted themselves among its followers.

We know little for certain as to what share particular Stoics, Zeno, Cleanthes, or Chrysippus, had in the formation of the doctrines of the school. But after Chrysippus the main lines of the doctrine were complete. We shall deal, therefore, with Stoicism as a whole, and not with the special teaching of particular Stoics. The system is divided into three parts, Logic, Physics, and Ethics, of which the first two are entirely subservient to the last. Stoicism is essentially a system of ethics which, however, is guided by a logic as theory of method, and rests upon physics as foundation.

Logic

We may pass over the formal logic of the Stoics, which is, in all essentials, the logic of Aristotle. To this, however, they added a theory, peculiar to themselves, of the origin of knowledge and the criterion of truth. All knowledge, they said, enters the mind through the senses. The mind is a *tabula rasa*, upon which sense-impressions are inscribed. It may have a certain activity of its own, but this activity is confined exclusively to materials supplied by the physical organs of sense. This theory stands, of course, in sheer opposition to the idealism of Plato, for whom the mind alone was the source of knowledge, the senses being the sources of all illusion and error. The Stoics denied the metaphysical reality of concepts. Concepts are merely ideas in the mind, abstracted from particulars, and have no reality outside consciousness.

Since all knowledge is a knowledge of sense-objects, truth is simply the correspondence of our impressions to things. How are we to know whether our ideas are correct copies of things? How distinguish between reality and imagination, dreams, or illusions? What is the criterion of truth? It cannot lie in concepts, since these are of our own making. Nothing is true save sense-impressions, and therefore the criterion of truth must lie in sensation itself. It cannot be in thought, but must be in feeling. Real objects, said the Stoics, produce in us an intense feeling, or conviction, of their reality. The strength and vividness of the image distinguish these real

perceptions from a dream or fancy. Hence the sole criterion of truth is this striking conviction, whereby the real forces itself upon our consciousness, and will not be denied. The relapse into complete subjectivity will here be noted. There is no universally grounded criterion of truth. It is based, not on reason, but on feeling. All depends on the subjective convictions of the individual.

Physics

The fundamental proposition of the Stoic physics is that “nothing incorporeal exists.” This materialism coheres with the sensationalism of their doctrine of knowledge. Plato placed knowledge in thought, and reality, therefore, in the Idea. The Stoics, however, place knowledge in physical sensation, and reality, therefore, in what is known by the senses, matter. All things, they said, even the soul, even God himself, are material and nothing more than material. This belief they based upon two main considerations. Firstly, the unity of the world demands it. The world is one, and must issue from one principle. We must have a monism. The idealism of Plato and Aristotle had resolved itself into a futile struggle against the dualism of matter and thought. Since the gulf cannot be bridged from the side of the Idea, we must take our stand on matter, and reduce mind to it. Secondly, body and soul, God and the world, are pairs which act and react upon one another. The body, for example, produces thoughts (sense-impressions) in the soul, the soul produces movements in the body. This would be impossible if both were not of the same substance. The corporeal cannot act on the incorporeal, nor the incorporeal on the corporeal. There is no point of contact. Hence all must be equally corporeal.

All things being material, what is the original kind of matter, or stuff, out of which the world is made? The Stoics turned to Heraclitus for an answer. Fire is the primordial kind of being, and all things are composed of fire. With this materialism the Stoics combined pantheism. The primal fire is God. God is related to the world exactly as the soul to the body. The human soul is likewise fire, and comes from the divine fire. It permeates and penetrates the entire body, and, in order that its interpenetration might be regarded as complete, the Stoics denied the impenetrability of matter. Just as the soul-fire permeates the whole body, so God, the primal fire, pervades the entire world. He is the soul of the world. The world is His body.

But in spite of this materialism, the Stoics averred that God is absolute reason. This is not a return to idealism. It does not imply the incorporeality of God. For reason, like all else, is material. It means simply that the divine fire is a rational element. Since God is reason, it follows that the world is governed by reason, and this means two things. It means, firstly, that there is purpose in the world, and therefore, order, harmony, beauty, and design. Secondly, since reason is law as opposed to the lawless, it means that the universe is subject to the absolute sway of law, is governed by the rigorous necessity of cause and effect.

Hence the individual is not free. There can be no true freedom of the will in a world governed by necessity. We may, without harm, say that we choose to do this or that, that our acts are voluntary. But such phrases merely mean that we assent to what we do. What we do is none the less governed by causes, and therefore by necessity.

The world-process is circular. God changes the fiery substance of himself first into air, then water, then earth. So the world arises. But it will be ended by a conflagration in which all things will return into the primal fire. Thereafter, at a pre-ordained time, God will again transmute himself into a world. It follows from the law of necessity that the course taken by this second, and every subsequent, world, will be identical in every way with the course taken by the first world. The process goes on for ever, and nothing new ever happens. The history of each successive world is the same as that of all the others down to the minutest details.

The human soul is part of the divine fire, and proceeds into man from God. Hence it is a rational soul, and this is a point of cardinal importance in connexion with the Stoic ethics. But the soul of each individual does not come direct from God. The divine fire was breathed into the first man, and thereafter passes from parent to child in the act of procreation. After death, all souls, according to some, but only the souls of the good, according to others, continue in individual existence until the general conflagration in which they, and all else, return to God.

Ethics

The Stoic ethical teaching is based upon two principles already developed in their physics; first, that the universe is governed by absolute law, which admits of no exceptions; and second, that the essential nature of man is reason. Both are summed up in the famous Stoic maxim, "Live according to nature." For this maxim has two aspects. It means, in the first place, that men should conform themselves to nature in the wider sense, that is, to the laws of the universe, and secondly, that they should conform their actions to nature in the narrower sense, to their own essential nature, reason. These two expressions mean, for the Stoics, the same thing. For the universe is governed not only by law, but by the law of reason, and man in following his own rational nature is *ipso facto* conforming himself to the laws of the larger world. In a sense, of course, there is no possibility of man's disobeying the laws of nature, for he, like all else in the world, acts of necessity. And it might be asked, what is the use of exhorting a man to obey the laws of the universe, when, as part of the great mechanism of the world, he cannot by any possibility do anything else? It is not to be supposed that a genuine solution of this difficulty is to be found in Stoic philosophy. They urged, however, that, though man will in any case do as the necessity of the world compels him, it is given to him alone, not merely to obey the law, but to assent to his own obedience, to follow the law consciously and deliberately, as only a rational being can.

Virtue, then, is the life according to reason. Morality is simply rational action. It is the universal reason which is to govern our lives, not the caprice and self-will of the individual. The wise man consciously subordinates his life to the life of the whole universe, and recognises himself as merely a cog in the great machine. Now the definition of morality as the life according to reason is not a principle peculiar to the Stoics. Both Plato and Aristotle taught the same. In fact, as we have already seen, to found morality upon reason, and not upon the particular foibles, feelings, or intuitions, of the individual self, is the basis of every genuine ethic. But what was peculiar to the Stoics was the narrow and one-sided interpretation which they gave to this principle. Aristotle had taught that the essential nature of man is reason, and that morality consists in following this, his essential nature. But he recognized that the passions and appetites have their place in the human organism. He did not demand their suppression, but merely their control by reason. But the Stoics looked upon the passions as essentially irrational, and demanded their complete extirpation. They envisaged life as a battle against the passions, in which the latter had to be completely annihilated. Hence their ethical views end in a rigorous and unbalanced asceticism.

Aristotle, in his broad and moderate way, though he believed virtue alone to possess intrinsic value, yet allowed to external goods and circumstances a place in the scheme of life. The Stoics asserted that virtue alone is good, vice alone evil, and that all else is absolutely indifferent. Poverty, sickness, pain, and death, are not evils. Riches, health, pleasure, and life, are not goods. A man may commit suicide, for in destroying his life he destroys nothing of value. Above all, pleasure is not a good. One ought not to seek pleasure. Virtue is the only happiness. And man must be virtuous, not for the sake of pleasure, but for the sake of duty. And since virtue alone is

good, vice alone evil, there followed the further paradox that all virtues are equally good, and all vices equally evil. There are no degrees.

Virtue is founded upon reason, and so upon knowledge. Hence the importance of science, physics, logic, which are valued not for themselves, but because they are the foundations of morality. The prime virtue, and the root of all other virtues, is therefore wisdom. The wise man is synonymous with the good man. From the root-virtue, wisdom, spring the four cardinal virtues, insight, bravery, self-control, justice. But since all virtues have one root, he who possesses wisdom possesses all virtue, he who lacks it lacks all. A man is either wholly virtuous, or wholly vicious. The world is divided into wise men and fools, the former perfectly good, the latter absolutely evil. There is nothing between the two. There is no such thing as a gradual transition from one to the other. Conversion must be instantaneous. The wise man is perfect, has all happiness, freedom, riches, beauty. He alone is the perfect king, statesman, poet, prophet, orator, critic, physician. The fool has all vice, all misery, all ugliness, all poverty. And every man is one or the other. Asked where such a wise man was to be found, the Stoics pointed doubtfully at Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic. The number of the wise, they thought, is small, and is continually growing smaller. The world, which they painted in the blackest colours as a sea of vice and misery, grows steadily worse.

In all this we easily recognize the features of a resuscitated Cynicism. But the Stoics modified and softened the harsh outlines of Cynicism, and rounded off its angles. To do this meant inconsistency. It meant that they first laid down harsh principles, and then proceeded to tone them down, to explain them away, to admit exceptions. Such inconsistency the Stoics accepted with their habitual cheerfulness. This process of toning down their first harsh utterances took place mainly in three ways. In the first place, they modified their principle of the complete extirpation of the passions. Since this is impossible, and, if possible, could only lead to immovable inactivity, they admitted that the wise man might exhibit certain mild and rational emotions, and that the roots of the passions might be found in him, though he never allowed them to grow. In the second place, they modified their principle that all else, save virtue and vice, is indifferent. Such a view is unreal, and out of accord with life. Hence the Stoics, with a masterly disregard of consistency, stuck to the principle, and yet declared that among things indifferent some are preferable to others. If the wise man has the choice between health and sickness, he will choose the former. Indifferent things were divided into three classes, those to be preferred, those to be avoided, and those which are absolutely indifferent. In the third place, the Stoics toned down the principle that men are either wholly good, or wholly evil. The famous heroes and statesmen of history, though fools, are yet polluted with the common vices of mankind less than others. Moreover, what were the Stoics to say about themselves? Were they wise men or fools? They hesitated to claim perfection, to put themselves on a level with Socrates and Diogenes. Yet they could not bring themselves to admit that there was no difference between themselves and the common herd. They were “proficients,” and, if not absolutely wise, approximated to wisdom.

If the Stoics were thus merely less consistent Cynics, and originated nothing in the doctrines of physics and ethics so far considered, yet of one idea at least they can claim to be the inventors. This was the idea of cosmopolitanism. This they deduced from two grounds. Firstly, the universe is one, proceeds from one God, is ordered by one law, and forms one system. Secondly, however much men may differ in unessentials, they share their essential nature, their reason, in common. Hence all men are of one stock, as rational beings, and should form one State. The division of mankind into warring States is irrational and absurd. The wise man is not a citizen of this or that State. He is a citizen of the world.

This is, however, only an application of principles already asserted. The Stoics produced

no essentially new thought, in physics, or in ethics. Their entire stock of ideas is but a new combination of ideas already developed by their predecessors. They were narrow, extreme, over-rigorous, and one-sided. Their truths are all half-truths. And they regarded philosophy too subjectively. What alone interested them was the question, how am I to live? Yet in spite of these defects, there is undoubtedly something grand and noble about their zeal for duty, their exaltation above all that is petty and paltry, their uncompromising contempt for all lower ends. Their merit, says Schwegeler, was that “in an age of ruin they held fast by the moral idea.”

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