



## Stoic Philosophy

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The founder of the Stoic school, Zeno of Citium in Cyprus, was the son of a family of merchants of Phoenician origin. Upon losing his fortune through shipwreck, he decided to indulge his taste for study. He was alternately the disciple of Crates, the Cynic, of Stilpo, the Megarian, and of the Academicians, Xenocrates and Polemo. Thereupon he taught philosophy in the Στοά τοικίλη at Athens. Convinced of the rightness of suicide, he put an end to his life about 260, leaving a great reputation and a large number of disciples behind. The school was continued by Cleanthes, a native of the Troad, the supposed author of the so-called hymn of Cleanthes, and after the voluntary death of the latter, by Chrysippus of Tarsus (according to others, of Soli) in Cilicia (280-210), in whose numerous polemical writings against the Academy, the teachings of the school received their final form.

In order to form a correct conception of Stoicism we must remember (1) that it is not merely a philosophy and a system of ethics, but a religion raised upon the ruins of popular polytheism; (2) that its founder and its most ardent disciples trace their origin either to Semitic Asia or to Roman Italy; (3) that it is not the work of a single individual, but a collection of doctrines from different sources which meet in one and the same channel like the tributaries of a river. Hence its conservatism in religion and its dogmatism in metaphysics. Hence also its practical turn, and, finally, the complex and wholly eclectic nature of its teachings.

Like Epicurus, Zeno and the Stoics pursue science for “the sake of life; truth, in so far as it is good and useful; the search for the *first* cause of being, in order to discover the *final* goal of life. Wisdom, i.e., theoretical and practical virtue, is the goal. Theoretical virtue consists in thinking correctly and in having correct notions of the nature of things; but practical virtue, which consists in right living and in acting according to reason, is the highest type of virtue, the goal aimed at by theoretical virtue, which is but a means. Whatever does not tend to make us better, and has no influence on our impulses and actions, is indifferent or bad. Logic, metaphysics, and the sciences have *no raison d’etre* except in so far as they are of practical value. They introduce us to the study of ethics, and this gives them their importance in the teachings of the school.

Conformably with its *voluntaristic* and anti-dualistic tendencies, Stoicism rejects Plato’s *separate Idea* even more emphatically than Aristotle. Ideas or universals have no objective existence; they exist neither outside of things, as Plato teaches, nor in things, as Aristotle holds; they are mere abstractions of thought, to which nothing corresponds in reality. Moreover, the soul has no innate ideas; it is an empty tablet, and all its concepts come to it from without. The sensible impression is, according to Cleanthes, like an impression made upon a material object, like the mark of a seal upon wax. Chrysippus defines it as

a modification of the soul. Sensation is the common source of all our ideas. The latter are divided into four categories, according as they express: substantiality, quality, mode of being, or relation. An idea is true when it is an exact reproduction of its object. The criterion of the truth of an idea is its clearness, its self-evidence. There are, according to Zeno, four degrees of knowledge: presentation, assent, comprehension, and understanding. In order to illustrate the highest degree of knowledge, which the philosopher alone attains, Zeno, it is said, used to place his left hand upon his clenched right. Following the example of Aristotle, the Stoics regarded grammar and rhetoric as integral parts of logic. They are worthy successors of the great logician in this field; indeed, the majority of our technical terms in grammar and syntax are of Stoic origin.

The Stoic metaphysic is, like their theory of knowledge, even more realistic than the system of Aristotle. It is concrete spiritualism pure and simple. Mind and body are two aspects of one and the same reality. In the real being, mind is the active element; matter, the passive element. There is no such thing as pure spirit. Whatever Aristotle may think of him, God has a body, and the world constitutes this body. The universe is a living being, of which God is the soul, the governing intelligence, the sovereign law, the motive principle, the animating warmth.

The Stoic theology is a kind of compromise between pantheism and theism. God is identical with the universe, but this universe is a real being, a living God who has a knowledge of things, who governs our destinies, who loves us, and desires our good, without, however, participating in human passions. The Stoics ascribe providential love to the Infinite Being; hence their teaching differs essentially from that of the Peripatetics and Epicureans. Their pantheism, which does not exclude the notion of Providence, is essentially religious. They have a pious respect for the religious forms of paganism; they grant the existence of gods who are inferior to Jupiter, and who are revealed either in the stars or in the forces of nature; but they declare these gods to be mortal, and ascribe immortality to the Supreme Being alone.

The Stoic system of physics is like that of Heraclitus; it adopts the view that heat is the principle of life, the theory of the periodical conflagration and renewal of the world, and shows what an important part the struggle for existence plays in nature. Inasmuch as the world is the body of the Deity, it is necessarily a perfect organism, and immaculately beautiful. Conversely, the perfection of the universe proves that it envelopes an infinite Intelligence, which is not, it is true, a transcendent principle, like the God of Aristotle, who moves only the Empyrean, but an omnipresent being like the human soul, which is present in all parts of the body. The evil in the world cannot shake the Stoic's faith in God; for just as a false note may contribute to the general harmony, and as, in a picture, the shadows tend to relieve the light and the colors, so, too, the evil contributes to the realization of the good. In the struggle with injustice, cowardice, and intemperance, justice, courage, and moderation shine with a brighter light. Instead of shaking the faith of the Stoic in Providence, evil confirms it, for evil adds to the universal harmony. The details alone are imperfect; the whole of things is supremely perfect.

Man is to the God-universe what the spark is to the flame, the drop to the ocean. Our body is a fragment of universal matter; our soul, a warm breath emanating from the soul of the world. Since, from the Stoic point of view, reality is synonymous with corporeality, the soul too is matter. If it were not so, the reciprocal action between it and the body would be inconceivable. The incorporeal cannot act upon a body. The decomposition of the body

does not necessarily involve the destruction of the soul; and even if there be no hereafter for all men, the soul of the sage at least, which is more vigorous than that of common mortals, survives death.

But though it may exist beyond the grave, say for centuries, even the philosopher's soul is not immortal in the absolute sense; for on the last day it will, like everything else in the world, disappear in the universal conflagration. Absolute immortality belongs to God alone. The fate which awaits the soul is not, however, a destruction of its substance; it will return to the infinite ocean whence it came.

The Stoics had no fixed dogmas concerning theoretical questions like the above; one might believe in immortality or not, without ceasing to be a disciple of the Stoa. What constituted the Stoic and united all the members of the school was the moral idealism which had been taught long before the times of Zeno by men like Socrates, Plato, and Antisthenes; and their motto was *virtue for virtue's sake*. The highest good, according to Stoicism, is to practise virtue for its own sake, to do your duty because it is your duty; everything else, health, fortune, honors, pleasures, are indifferent and even bad, when they are the sole object of your strivings. Virtue alone makes us happy, provided we seek it in a disinterested manner. It does not consist merely in the outward performance of the good, but in an habitual disposition of the soul. It is *one*; you cannot be virtuous in one respect and vicious in another. It is the common source of what we call *the virtues*, i.e., wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. To possess one of these cardinal virtues is to possess them all in principle; not to have one of them means to have none. A man is good in all things or bad in all. There is no mean between virtue and vice. Theoretically, there are but two classes of men, the good and the bad, although in reality there seem to be shades, transitions, and compromises between good and evil. Happy is the sage, who, versed in the secrets of nature, knows himself and others; whom this knowledge frees from the guardianship of men, the times, social prejudices, and the laws themselves, in so far as they are the products of human caprice and not of reason. He alone is truly free; he has overcome the world as well as his own passions. Nothing can affect him nor make him falter; neither the happenings of the world nor the storms in his own heart. Let come what come may, he is resigned; for everything is decreed by Nature and Fate; and Nature and Fate are synonymous with Reason, Providence, and good Will. Hence, the supreme rule which he observes in all things: *sequi naturam* to follow nature, that is, the law which nature enjoins upon conscience, and which is identical with the law that governs the world.

It would be an easy task to point out the contradictions in the theories which we have just outlined, to contrast the moral idealism of the Stoics with the thorough-going realism of their ontology. But, as was said, we have in Stoicism not the system of a single individual but a collection of doctrines advanced by one and the same sect, a religion for the educated classes, who desired to bring their "new faith" into harmony with the old, a kind of union between virtue and the polytheistic Church, embracing the most diverse elements, but inspired with the same ideals. Panaetius of Rhodes and Posidonius of Apamea, the teacher of Cicero and Pompey, introduced the teachings of Stoicism into the Roman world. Owing to the close affinity existing between these teachings and the Latin and Semitic spirit, the Stoics were not long in gaining adherents. Those especially, who, on the decline of the Republic, battled unsuccessfully against the growing despotism of the Caesars, men like Cicero, Cato, and Brutus, found in this philosophy a deep source of encouragement and consolation. To Stoicism we owe Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*, Seneca's

*Moral Letters*, the noble teachings of Epictetus which Flavius Arrianus preserved in his *Encheiridion*, and the twelve books *Ad se ipsum* of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, one of the most admirable products of ancient ethics. Nevertheless, its influence cannot be compared with that of Christianity.

It was confined to the world of letters and hardly penetrated the masses. Stoicism has nothing to make it popular; it pursues the paths of science and of meditation; it, too, shuns “the vulgar crowd” and is identified, in practice, with Epicureanism.

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Alfred Weber. *History of Philosophy*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902.

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