Chapter 4

Stoicism and Other Influences

Plato’s and Aristotle’s thinking on notions of law, of morality, of the ‘greater good’, of asceticism, even some aspects of God gave a language and a basis for discussing the larger human situation. While most of their ‘scientific’ thinking has subsequently been dismissed, it has been hard to shake their ‘scientific’ moral discussions, or the thinking that within each of us lays a certain amount of knowledge and the ability to discern it somehow which we can then use to act correctly or at least discover how to act correctly and the responsibility to do so. Their influence was great and not just confined to two separate schools. As with any good idea people try to integrate the best ideas from disparate sources to try to come up with a cohesive whole; sometimes they succeed, most times not.

The Rome into which Christianity begins its adolescence is governed by Marcus Aurelius (121-180, a Stoic and philosopher king and a bit of a Christian basher himself, except he used real clubs). Marcus declared that there were four chairs of philosophy: Platonic, Aristotelian**,** Epicurean, and Stoic and he encouraged the teaching of each. So if we wish to discuss the milieu into which Christianity comes of age, we have to consider at least these four schools. Having explored the first two, we now move into the broader world.

Enter Zeno of Citium (336-264 BC). Kind of an eccentric, he espoused a fusion of Plato and Aristotle which became known as Stoicism. While the school of thought is based on the philosophical musings of one man on the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, it really has a life of its own. Technically I said that with Plato and Aristotle are set the philosophical foundations of Western theology, and that is still true; Stoicism brings yet another aspect to the table – a language of spirituality as well.

Stoicism

Stoicism is essentially a system of ethics (like Plato) which is guided by logic (Aristotelian inspired) and has physics (observable phenomena like Aristotle) as its foundation with the thinking of Zeno thrown in. The name comes from the ‘*stoa*’ (Greek for “column”) of the Agora (marketplace) in Athens from around which they spouted their philosophy. This Agora lies just below the hill of the Areopagus below the Parthenon where Paul preached the message of the Gospel to the crowd a few hundred years later.

The main teaching is that life should be lived in accordance with Nature and controlled by Virtue. The way to reach that was considered stern even by standards of that day; it is an ascetic system, teaching self-denial, restraint, and renunciation of worldly pleasures which releases the soul from bondage to the material appetites of the body. Once one has cleansed oneself of this bondage it permits its union with the divine. Today our world has a dour view of this thinking as self-denial for pointless purposes. Not so for the Greeks; we must remember that Virtue was a prize, the *greatest good*. To accomplish this prized goal they urged a *perfect indifference* (Gk. *apathea*: “apathy”) to everything external, for external things are not considered to be either good or evil. Hence to the Stoics both pain and pleasure, poverty and riches, sickness and health, were equally unimportant.

The Logic Of Action

This ‘apathy’ is not about not caring or even having no emotions at all, but about keeping our emotions in check, balanced by the rational mind such that nothing distracts one from Virtue. It is probably better thought of as ‘indifference’ but in an even-keeled sort of mindset – good or bad it does not really matter. In a deviation from earlier thinkers, knowledge is not *the* Virtue. Instead, simply put, Virtue is ‘the Will in tune with Nature’. One seeks to eliminate the destructive aspects (*appetites*) of one’s life not so much by mere physical asceticism per se but asceticism as more of a discipline of will. Stoicism is a system based in rationality *and* action. In the *Faith vs. Works* discussion we can consider them part of the *Works* camp.

Logic then, as the method for rational discovery, is a major component of this system, but not necessarily as Aristotle would have recognized it. As we have mentioned, for Aristotle it was based in predicates, the combing of words (no combination of which has conclusive truth or falseness contained within it – though it can be considered a ‘truth’ from a previous argument) into statements which are evaluated in a syllogism. Stoic Logic on the other hand, is based in statements and connects propositions together via logical operators to produce ideas and reflects the Stoic propensity to action. *The Earth is round; Paris is the capital of France.* Those are *statements* or *propositions*. For Stoics, to spend time on the individual terms, as does Aristotle, is to waste time on *incomplete* *ideas*. That is to say, “the Earth is round” and that “the Earth rotates” (definitions for Aristotle) tell us about things which in and of themselves we do not have to worry about defining. It is the *connecting* of things which is important. So, to say “*The Earth is round* AND *the Earth rotates*” means “*Therefore the Earth is a round thing which rotates”.* Logical statements depend upon their connections. We can see it in this quote from Zeno: “*No evil is honorable: but death is honorable; therefore death is not evil.*” (As quoted in *Epistles*, by Seneca)

Stoic logic then, is the means of putting things in *relationship* to one another. This logic is essentially about how the statements (*propositions*) connect together. The logical ways of combining or altering statements or propositions to form more complicated statements or propositions is the main focus of this type of logic. For that reason Stoic or *propositional* logic can be thought of as (primarily) the study of *logical operators*, i.e. any word or phrase used either to modify one statement to make a different statement, or join multiple statements together to form a more complicated statement. For example “and”, “or”, “not”, “if-then”, “because”, and “necessarily”, are all *operators*.

Reasoning About Reality

Aristotle’s physics was a system for discussing reality. Stoics have a sense of physics which is similar but with a few twists. Similar to their logic of action, the universe is a tangible place of relationships, characterized by cause and effect; everything is material (solid), even things like God, the soul, and justice, i.e. they are ‘real’. Essentially this means that everything is ‘real’, there is no speculative, unknowable, ungraspable Form thing and everything is connected by cause and effect, not by essence and existence. This differs from Plato in the first and Aristotle in the second. For our needs we will point out that causes fall into two categories: *antecedent* causes and *principle* causes. Think of it like a bowling ball. Your flinging of the ball down the lane is the antecedent and the roundness of the ball (which allows it to continue rolling) is the principle. If you flung a square box down the lane you would not have a principle which would allow it to continue down the lane; you would observe a different effect where it slides for a moment and then stops, usually without reaching the pins. Again, this makes sense in terms of their logic.

So the relationship between the antecedent and the principle is very important, and they must go together for a specific effect to happen. But is this just a random connection of things, which we are lucky enough to have had work out in our favor? Is there something which connects everything together for proper effects? For the Stoic, the cause and effect universe has a sort of central core, a ‘prime mover’, a universal or ‘divine’ reason, which can be called ‘God’ (or ‘Zeus’ or whatever you feel so inclined to call it). For Aristotle this force is outside of Nature, it is ‘pure mind’ and as such has no *physical* substance. Stoics, by making ‘God’ physical, place ‘God’ *within* the world. Nature *is* God, or at least the bit of what we can understand of God. Something (everything) participates in God because it is part of the universe (i.e. Nature) and vice versa. This nature is therefore ruled by reason (*Logos*). This means that it has laws and the world adheres to these laws. Physics for the Stoics is the study of the workings of Divine Reason, which is the relation of causes to effects (again, just as logic is the study of relations).

Pretty Is As Pretty Does

So, for the Stoic, our actions and the effects of our actions are related, meaning that physics and ethics are also tied together: “*God is not separate from the world; He is the soul of the world, and each of us contains a part of the Divine Fire. All things are parts of one single system, which is called Nature; the individual life is good when it is in harmony with Nature...Virtue consists in a will which is in agreement with Nature.*” (Bertrand Russel, *History of Western Philosophy*, Speaking about **Stoicism)** The human will disciplined and in tune with Nature is Virtue. Still, what does that have to do with how we act toward one another?

If God is Nature (in a somewhat pan-theistic way), then when we follow Universal/Divine Reason (the *Logos*, what we can call the Natural Law which is also within us), we are in tune with God’s Will. We have virtue. “*Happiness is a good flow of life*,” said Zeno[[1]](#footnote-1), and this can only be achieved through the use of right Reason coinciding with the *Logos* which governs everything. A bad feeling “*is a disturbance of the mind repugnant to Reason, and against Nature*.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This rational conscience, this soul, this convergence of ‘God’ and the mind out of which morally good actions spring is Virtue; true good can only consist in Virtue. We seek to do the good for one another, because that is the Natural Law, the divine Will, the structure of the universe or however you want to portray it.

Similar to Plato and Socrates’ idea of evil rising from ignorance, Stoics taught that evil rose from the *rejection* of right Reason. Differently, it is all black and white for the Stoics. Actions are either good or bad, they cannot be both nor can they even be a little of one and a lot of the other. All errors must be rooted out, not merely set aside, and replaced with right Reason. The suppression/eradication of the negative emotions which cause suffering and sorrow (*desire, fear, pleasure and pain*) produces moral actions and immoral actions are those not guided by right Reason. Period.

As a foundational aside, the idea of ‘freewill’ fluctuates within Stoic thought but basically boils down to (because it is the one I want to emphasize): following the Will or choosing to not follow the Will. There is a certain deterministic view present in the Stoic discussion, based in their black and white view of things, as shown in the example of a dog tied to a cart. If the dog chooses to go with the cart when it moves, *va bene*. Or he can choose to not go with the cart, but in the end will be drug along anyway.

True freedom is freedom from emotional control and attachment. As said earlier, indifference is not apathy as we think of it but a refusal to be mastered by the thing, an indifference to it. Functionally, they are not nihilists because when you think about it, if one did not care at all then what is the point of living? *How* one cares and acts is the rub. One does not want to help someone out of pity (an emotion) but out of the rational understanding of the good. For Stoics, freedom is merely the choice between right Reason and well, frankly, stupidity. Happiness will only come from (rational) moral actions. This would also imply a certain amount of social interaction and Stoics as a whole are encouraged to participate and even lead, in the Platonic philosopher king vein.

Eat Drink And Be Merry

If we can get a sense of how Stoicism can be appealing to Christian theologians, then we can see how perhaps Epicureanism does not fit into the Christian milieu and would therefore not be much of an influence, except in a *via negativa* perhaps. But at the same time they say that one is judged by one’s enemies. Opposite of the Stoics, Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) believed ethics should be guided by feelings as Physics is guided by our senses. He was a real go with the flow kind of guy, ranting against both the gods and any sense of an afterlife mainly because there is no *rational* proof. Where Stoics would teach the control of emotion in order to find happiness Epicurus sees happiness in letting go and not being bound by external forces, like gods or the afterlife because they cause only anxiety.

Epicurus’ Physics has only use within the scope of action(*praxis*). He feels that the only use for ‘natural science’ (the study of ‘natures’) is the healing of people’s ills. All speculation of other life forms and rocks (Aristotle) only has use if it can be applied to human suffering. Knowledge, as for Plato, has no value in and of itself whereas for Aristotle all knowledge has value in and of itself. So take a moment and think again about Plato and Aristotle and set their understanding of knowledge and its purpose (*telos*). Knowledge leads to virtue and that is its main goal. Not so fast Epicurus says. What good are the platitudes of philosophers to heal the ills of the world? Knowledge must have a pragmatic purpose.

Interestingly, he attributes most sickness and suffering to superstitious beliefs which rise from external forces and the incessant worry it causes. One tries to be what one is not or else seeks constant escape from the reality of who one is to the final detriment caused by the hatred of the self which one is trying to escape. He does point out a problem which can easily arise in Christianity: *scrupulosity* – the obsession with sin and one’s sinfulness. If Jesus “*came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly*” (*John* 10:10) then to dwell in fear and anxiety is not very abundant. That caveat and selfish hedonism which had developed under the guise of Epicureanism floated like a lead balloon with Christian theologians.

I Don’t Know So

So one could say the Christians would be skeptical of the Epicureans, but that would be inaccurate. Skepticism does not have to do with sussing out negative gut feelings associated with the statements of another, but in the fullest sense of doubt. The word comes to us from a group active in Greece and mildly popular later in Rome. The Skeptics, like Stoicism, were based in the thought of one man, Carneades (214-129 BC), but broadened into a whole school of thought. Carneades, who headed Plato’s *Academy*, had a problem with both the Epicureans and the Stoics in that they focused on sensory experience as the basis for knowledge. He felt that was fraught with an inability to have exactitude. Our senses and emotions can mislead us. Instead, one should hold off on any judgment on *anything*, as a nod to the fact that we can truly know nothing. For Skeptics, one must have rational doubt, but not as we would define rational doubt today. One does not just mistrust the senses, one mistrusts the intellect as well. All of our experience, both rational and sensual, tells us of the weakness of both to tell us anything about what is real or true.

The secret then is to *suspend judgment*, not to a paralysis of inactivity, but relying instead on *probability*, that one can come to reasonably accurate ideas by which one can then operate. The secret then is to doubt *certainty*, not reasonableness. By holding off on final judgment, one can see if any better information comes along which can aid in a better understanding. In terms of the Christian theology of the early Church, Skepticism would have no place as there could be no doubt, or approximation of the truth. Paul speaks in terms of certitude and that our assurances rest not in vague hope but in the certainty of the truth. However, Skepticism will continue to develop and have an influence in later medieval theology.

The Language Of Love

I mentioned at the beginning but did not really follow up on the idea of spiritual language. Asceticism is a big word and while broached by Plato and Aristotle, it is very central to the Stoic mindset – without discipline and self-denial there is no happiness. It does not lie in merely knowing, or merely acting out one’s nature but through conscious, rational actions based in rational choices about the relationship between things.

Asceticism and Christianity, aside from obviously odd association with the thought of one of its persecutors, make less than strange bed fellows. One can see how the idea of freedom and happiness not lying within fleeting, subjectivist things or some sort of ill-formed will but in an external, rational realm, one of disciplined selfless service could have a certain appeal to the early Christian thinkers. This language echoes the spiritual life of the Christian; a certain indifference to personal pain but at the same time happiness in calm, rational hope, a joy coming from Paul’s statement that he decrease as Christ increases. The mystics of later times will call upon this; the saints will sing its praises. At the same time, it can lead one to excesses of privation or discipline bordering on self-abuse, and by extension abuse of others. There is a fine line in spirituality between what gives dignity and what diminishes it. Still, we must embrace all that we are and the language of these philosophers gives us a wide range of human emotion and thought to draw upon.

Plato took an idealist view of the world, where the perfect was in the ideal; Aristotle a rational one where perfection was found within the thing. Epicurus’ epistemological view embraced feeling and emotion as the foundation of knowledge (we ‘know’ what we ‘sense’) and the Stoics took the opposite view: emotion was the flaw which produced all suffering. Christian spirituality, at its best, embraces the whole of the person. Destructive emotions, such as anger or jealousy keep us from happiness and therefore have to be kept in check. Logic and reason rule the day, but we have incense and bells to stimulate the senses. Self-control and fortitude are the means of overcoming these destructive emotions. We take joy in our control of the appetites, molding the will to God’s will. The purpose of Christian spirituality is similar to that of the Stoic: is not a denial of emotions or the physical world but is a system based in rationality and action.

Putting It Together

The Stoics reinforce the idea of stability and objectivity over relativism and subjectivity. Like Plato and unlike Aristotle, they arrive there by a lot of conclusion and minimum of argumentation. The level at which Aristotle addresses the world is not necessary, but his thinking about how to think about things is. Without addressing the rational, one cannot overcome the emotions. From Plato they teach that happiness does not come from random emotional feelings but through rational judgment and the denial of random emotional feelings. From Aristotle they conclude that everything is real, and that reality is infused with meaning.

The conclusion that everything is in relationship is a powerful teaching, and the fact that all relationships go back to a central core relationship provides a powerful image of the God and Creation. The idea that we are rational beings guided by an objective design and capable of overcoming base appetites and bettering ourselves reflects the nature given us at Creation.

Again, we are looking more at the influence of the language of these thinkers as much as the influential thought. That is to say, the language is often the adapted portion, more so than the thought. Plato’s transmigration of the soul will never make it into orthodox Christian thought, but his language of the soul will.

*“Physical reality is consistent with universal laws. Where the laws do not operate, there is no reality -- we judge reality by the responses of our senses. Once we are convinced of the reality of a given situation, we abide by its rules.”*

**Spock,** *Specter of the Gun*

1. As quoted by John of Stobi – 5th century AD [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As quoted by Cicero, *Tusculanae Quaestiones* – 1st century BC [↑](#footnote-ref-2)