

## **TONY CHADWICK PRIZE 1994 RUNNER-UP**

### **TO BE A PHILOSOPHER-KING...**

by Catherine Walton

I think that if I could have a time-machine for just one visit, I would use it to visit the market-square in Athens, one afternoon in 311 BC. I would get myself a tan and a tunic and I would sit down with the others to listen to the bookseller reading aloud from Xenophon's "Reminiscences of Socrates". Of course I would listen respectfully, but I would really be looking out for a particular young man, also a visitor. He was Zeno, the son of Mnaseas. Phoenician merchant of Citium, an old Greek colony on Cyprus. There is a rumour that he may have been shipwrecked, but probably he had been interested by philosophy since reading the Socratic books his father brought home. I would be waiting for the moment when he asked the bookseller "Where are men of that kind to be found?" and was told, "Follow that man!", and I would go after Zeno and Crates the Cynic. This was the first philosopher that Zeno studied. He also went to Polemo, head of the Academy founded by Plato, seventy-five years before; listened to the logical puzzles of Diodorus 'Cronus' at the Megarian school; and may, among others, have come across the newly-opened Peripatetic school where Aristotle's pupil Theophrastus taught.

When he started his own school in the Stoa Poikile, his own teaching, although showing these influences, also showed the thought of Babylon and the East. This Stoa was a colonnade in the north-west corner of the agora, and his followers became known as the Stoics. It was decorated with murals such as 'The Taking of Troy' and 'The Battle of Marathon', when Athens was glorious. By Zeno's time, Alexander had become Great; he had defeated both Greeks and Persians, and his Empire stretched from Macedonia to Egypt and India. This thrust many diverse cultures into the melting-pot, and ended the autonomy of the Greek city-states. There was widespread unsettlement and insecurity - not only political and economic but also physical and moral. Following the death of Alexander in 323BC, there were forty-odd years of fighting as the Successors fought for shares of his Empire. Athens itself surrendered to Alexander's general Antigonos, after starvation during a long siege, just a few months before Zeno's death in 262BC. During these disturbances, many Greeks emigrated from their cities in search of better fortunes. and numbers of these were drawn to the newer philosophies, including Stoicism.

The new philosophies were the only ones which seemed to offer a guide to life in the changed circumstances. Aristotle's work would have seemed out of date by the end of his own life, and Zeno wrote a new "Republic" which was, (so far as can be deduced), a challenge to Plato's. Where Plato had considered the personality of an ideal king, Stoicism considered the institution of monarchy in the real world. Since the city-states were no longer independent, the philosopher-king failed the test of perfection, which was self-sufficiency, if he tolerated the co-existence of other kings. The Mediterranean was now surrounded by monarchies, and although Macedonia, Syria and Egypt held the balance of power, none could be called self-sufficient. Stoicism did not have a political programme as such, but held that it was man's duty to take part in political life and, such was its spread and influence over the next centuries, there were many highly-placed Stoics, including several rulers. Plato's influence on politics was not to be apparent until hundreds of years later;<sup>[1]</sup> during his lifetime he could only point to the unfortunate attempt to advise Dionysius II of Syracuse, and some visits to local rulers by some other members of the Academy.

The Stoics used a metaphor to summarise their philosophy:- a fruitful tree in a walled field. The wall is logic, protecting the tree - physics or the construction of the world; its fruit is ethics, showing man his place in the structure. The purpose of their logic was to discover and to defend the possibility of truth<sup>[2]</sup>, from which follow their physics and ethics. In their physics, space and time are merely dimensions of things. The Universe is going through a progression begun by the Logos with the creation of the four elements of fire, air, water and earth, and ending in the return of everything to fire before the cycle begins again. This had the important consequence of a determinist belief in Fate, and divination - not because an augury or horoscope could cause an event but that it must be concomitant with that event where everything is ruled by one Reason. God, the Universal Reason, is the creative fire directing all events, as well as the tension which holds everything together, and is both good and wise.

Their *summum bonum* was a life of rational action or Virtue, lived 'according to nature'. but involving effort. Man should seek knowledge and spiritual peace by living as self-sufficiently and benevolently as God himself, cultivating detachment and virtue to become wise. The ideal was the strong, self-aware 'Stoic Sage', who could separate well-being from external conditions. They held that actions are not evil in themselves but due to our 'rational assent', because we are responsible to Reason. The four Stoic Virtues<sup>[3]</sup> were fundamentally attitudes based on Knowledge: Wisdom - knowing what is good and what is bad; Temperance - knowing what sensations to accept and what emotions to control; Justice - knowing enough to give others what is rightly theirs; and Fortitude - bravery is knowing what need not be feared. Virtue itself is a kind of "manliness", meaning "the doing of noble deeds and an unwillingness to obey illegal commands".<sup>[4]</sup> It becomes clear how Stoicism came to contribute the ideas of conscience and duty to the world. Unlike the hedonist Epicureans of the same period, pleasure could not be an end to a Stoic, even if it might happen to be there. Indeed, the Stoic should be indifferent to anything which was not a virtue.

Another contribution was the idea that all men are equals and have the same 'common notions' or basic set of ideas. This follows from the idea that each man is a bridge between the mortal and the immortal, since all have a spark of the same Divine Reason. Even under the Roman Empire it led to a movement to give slaves their freedom. It also led to the theory of Natural Law, and that all men must be of service to their fellow creatures. They held that this law could be discovered by the exercise of a person's own reason. Cosmopolitanism has probably been their greatest contribution to thought:- whether Greek or barbarian, slave or free, rich or poor, man or woman, all are citizens of one world.

The first "Philosopher-King" was Antigonus Gonatus (276-241 BC), who freed Macedon, and was the second founder of their monarchy. A friend of Zeno and a Stoic, he refused to allow himself to be worshipped, when ruler-cults had been the norm since Alexander. He was a plain-spoken man, able to be sarcastic about himself, and a good king. He believed that taxation should be by consent only. Although he fought several wars, they were never of his making, and the peace he gave to Macedonia restored her strength and security. He and his dynasty left most of Greece independent too, safeguarding her civilization from barbarism. He was the first ruler ever to lay down that a king should be the servant of his people, kingship being the possession of the state. Zeno was invited to Macedon, but sent instead two pupils, including Persaeus who was later made governor of Corinth.

The last "Philosopher-King" was Marcus Aurelius, Emperor of Rome (161-180AD). He had to contend with wars on the Syrian and Danube frontiers, plague and famine. Rome's internal

peace was maintained by a combination of consent, tradition and institutionalized terror. He believed that God had called him to be a ruler, that is, to preserve the lives and property of his subjects, but to a Stoic these were worthless. Yet he was noted for his conscientious performance of his public duties, especially his scrupulous care with judicial and legal matters. He is best known for his "Meditations"; a gloomy document characterised by Stoic resignation - as Divine Providence controls all things according to Reason, one should accept whatever comes along without protest. Also, one should accept deprivations in the same spirit, whether of health, wealth or even loved ones. Only the holding of the right moral attitude is really within one's own power, and one should show indifference to everything else which is not. The wisest man has the fewest expectations, since Fortune can remove all things at a stroke.

Stoicism was a great success in Rome, perhaps because it offered a useful political philosophy at a time when Rome was growing out of a city-state into an empire. It provided a justification for her dominion, a rationale to guide the lawyers; Roman law developed along Stoic lines owing to the lawyers' training and is still the basis of much European and international law, due to its striking conception of the individual and his rights. beyond the laws of their own particular society. Stoicism also encouraged people in their civic duties, when patriotism ceased to be a strong motivator. The Stoics held that a king should not treat the state as his own domain, nor tax his people as if their possessions were his own. Similarly, it discouraged the use of public offices for personal enrichment, and living a life of extravagant luxury and vicious self-gratification, or leaving hard or inconvenient things like war to professionals. This appealed to the streak of austere puritanism in the Roman character.

The essence of Stoicism is its individualism, but the insistence on duty, inward self-control and subjection to the will of God leads to the subordination of good citizens to the will of the state. It held that each person must be willing to sacrifice themselves for the needs of the universal brotherhood. This may well have suited the governing class of an imperial nation. However, while there was an ideal of independence, man was seen as more than an individual interested only in his own welfare; he had an inborn social impulse making group life necessary to him. The Stoic did not avoid politics, as the Epicurean did, he saw the state only as his shield while envisaging a social contract. There were Stoic political martyrs during the reign of Nero.

Of course there were attacks on the theory, not least by Carneades the Academic, which caused later Stoics to forget about the metaphysical underpinnings:- beliefs in the criteria of truth; prophecy & divination; fate rather than free will; justice as a thing in itself rather than a convention; the final conflagration. But Stoicism was elastic, and anyway, its principles had already become the common rules of morality. Some accuse the Stoics of intellectual pride, but Epictetus held also that man has an innate morality: this should be actualized by education, not left to decay. Individual ethics may have become more important simply because the empire grew too vast for most people to contemplate. The cosmopolitan idea was absorbed by Christianity - one flock in one fold - and was carried forward by it. The Stoic mixed constitution has also come down to us. Where Plato preferred to combine monarchy with democracy, and Aristotle combined democracy with oligarchy, the Stoics took all three. In Rome, the magistrates stood for monarchy, the Senate for oligarchy and the people for democracy. This model was used for the U.S. constitution.

Although at first sight Stoicism may appear quaint, I hope you can see how its aim, to make personal and political lives of men as orderly as the cosmos, led to a real contribution to political

philosophy, still showing vigorous life today - and why I should very much like to have caught a glimpse of young Zeno when he arrived in the market-place.

### References

1. See, for example. Karl Popper's "The Open Society and Its Enemies"
2. Stoic logic also stressed the propositional calculus, being the first non-syllogistic logicians.
3. With the addition of Faith, Elope and Charity. these became the Cardinal Virtues of Christianity.
4. J. M. Rist: "Stoic Philosophy", page 199, Cambndge University Press, 1990.

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