Stoicism

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There were four major schools of philosophy in the Hellenistic world--Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism. In addition, there were various minor groups, such as Cynics and Cyrenaics, and a group that has fascinated philosophers ever since, the Sceptics. We can't deal with any of them here. Now we've studied the first three in some detail; today, I'll just say a few things about the fourth, Stoicism.

The first three Stoic figures were Zeno (not the paradox guy), Cleanthes, and Chrysippus: all Greeks, from 300-200 BCE. After a period of competition with Epicureans for allegiance among the Roman ruling class, three later Roman Stoics appeared: Seneca, an advisor to Caligula and Nero (@4 BCE to 65 CE); Epictetus, a slave turned head of a philosophy school upon being freed (50-138); and Marcus Aurelius, who succeeded Hadrian as emperor and reigned until 180: in a sense, he was the philosopher-king Plato theorized about--but only in a sense, as I will explain. (As we can see, with Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, Stoicism had the most political influence of any philosophical school, or, better put, had the most politically-powerful adherents.)

Although the early Stoics had a full-fledged philosophical system, with detailed theories of logic, linguistic meaning, epistemology, cosmology, and so forth, it was their practical philosophy that was picked up by the later Roman Stoics. We'll concentrate on that, since it was both politically important at the time, and the name and outlook have survived: we still talk about "bearing misfortune Stoically."

The Stoics wanted to "live according to nature." Similar to Aristotle, they found the human good to be fulfilling the natural human capacity to develop self-direction. Unlike Epicurus, then, they took rational activity to be the goal of fulfilled humans, not pleasure; pleasure was a mere by-product of rational activity or self-direction. (Of course, all the gender and class labor that goes into the leisure necessary to allow the development of the capacity for self-direction went unremarked inside Stoic thinking itself.)

Now, what's important here is to know what one can control: to what extent can I truly be self-directed?We have to beware of staking any importance on external goods: economic success, political power, even health. What we do have under our control, no matter the chaos around us, is our character and our attitude: we can control how we react to things we cannot control. (You can see here the appeal of Stoic practical philosophy to those living in chaotic times.)

Now the Stoics did recognize that some situations are better and preferable to others. They called external events "indifferents," because they make no difference to your happiness, which depends on your reaction to events. Nonetheless, some indifferents can be preferred to others, as contributing to a well-rounded life. However, strictly speaking, the virtuous, self-directed person can be happy in any type of circumstance.

The big difference here between Stoics and Epicureans occurs in political philosophy. For the Epicureans, politics was madness: better by far to have a few friends with whom to serenely contemplate the universe and with whom to enjoy moderate and secure pleasures. The Stoics, on the other hand, had a sense of political duty. For them, human plurality, in family, friendship and political community, was part of human nature, and taking part in governing a stable community was a duty. Again, this duty is undertaken not to be happy, for that can happen even in a badly-run community, but because given the chance to influence things, it is better to have a good community than not. Political peace is a "preferred indifferent." And, since the Stoics were members of the community, they could appreciate that others would not like to live poorly either, so that their sympathy would allow them to act on behalf of others, to prevent them from suffering the loss of their preferred indifferents.

Now the Stoic view of life sometimes led them to suicide. The idea was this: as self-directed, I am happy and fulfilled. Happiness or flourishing then is a certain intensity of activity. Additional life, in the sense of merely adding on years, would not add to the intensity of my activity: I can be no more self-directed than I am at any one moment of true self-direction. (Take the example of temperature: my health is best at 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. At the moment that this is my temperature, I am healthy. I cannot add or subtract degrees and remain healthy, and additional days can never be any more healthy than this one.) Thus, suicide was an alternative when continued life would pile up "bad indifferents": imprisonment, torture, disgrace, and so on. Seneca, would, in fact, commit suicide, at Nero's behest.

We began by alluding to Marcus Aurelius as in only one sense a philosopher-king. Now in one sense he was: he was the Roman Imperator and Princeps, and he wrote the *Meditations* (in Greek), which have been long admired as a collection of philosophical epigrams: short, witty sayings on a wide variety of philosophical themes. But in another sense, he was not the philosopher-king Plato wanted: he had no intention of a radical reform to bring about the just city. Why not? Because he wasn't ruling a city, but an empire!