

How Zeno's Stoicism is still relevant today by Nigel Glassborow March 2019 thestoia@hotmail.co.uk

Stoicism is "one of the loftiest and most sublime philosophies in the record of Western civilization. In urging participation in the affairs of man, Stoics have always believed that the goal of all inquiry is to provide man with a mode of conduct characterised by tranquillity of mind and certainty of moral worth." And "the themes of universal brotherhood and the benevolence of divine nature makes Stoicism one of the most appealing of philosophies." [Encyclopaedia Britannica; 'Stoicism. Philosophical Schools & Doctrines.' Copyright 2004. Used with permission]

Stoicism may be called either a philosophy or a religion. ['The Stoic Philosophy' – a lecture given by Professor Gilbert Murray 16 March 1915 at the South Place Institute]

In Zeno's time the word 'philosophy' meant 'the love of wisdom' and, in this context, the word 'religion' carries no more intent other than the claim that Stoicism involves an element of 'faith' supported by the wise use of knowledge. We are not talking of some academic branch of 'philosophy' as taught in universities nor of 'organised religion' with all of the trappings that come with such.

Stoicism does not involve accepting anything on faith alone. Zeno and his fellow Stoics, like Socrates before him, questioned everything, and the would-be Stoic is encouraged to do likewise.

So to setting Stoicism in its historical context. From Socrates to Zeno and beyond, the great Athenian schools of thought were faced with a populous that suffered all manner of psychological problems resulting from the nature of 'civilisation' at the time. The constant warring, the constant power struggles amongst the elite and the constant threat to the individual's security of family, property and life left many in heightened states of emotion and a reduced ability to view life rationally. One unguarded comment at the wrong time or one individual trying to curry favour with someone in power by telling tales (true or false) could throw one's life into chaos. On top of this, the stability that the religions of the day had offered was gradually being eroded. The framework of beliefs on which people based their lives was gradually being broken down.

(Sounds sort of familiar. Nothing much has changed even up to today.)

Despite being immersed in such a society, the thinkers of the ancient Athenian schools tried to find a new framework by which to live while also looking to 'cure' the epidemic of mental illness.

Unfortunately the thinkers were a product of their age and as a result they were often blinded to the very wisdom they were trying to develop. Just as today, many of the thinkers tried being over intellectual in their approach to the problems and so went down blind

alleys, often seeking after 'the ideal'. There was an elitist society and this is reflected in the many attempts to work out how the 'ideal' society would govern itself. And of course, the various schools had their 'ideal' societies being governed by 'ideal' people – 'sages'.

While we are told that Zeno also looked to how society could be better managed, probably falling into the same trap as the founders of the other schools, Zeno's approach to learning how to live is practical rather than being overly intellectual and idealised.

To this end, first and foremost Stoicism offers a framework of belief and practical observation that is centred in the principle that the nature of the Cosmos is that of a oneness that is 'a singular living rational being' of which we, as individuals, are a part.

Some may claim that this principle is 'blind faith', but today it is more based on two factors. The one is the ancient wisdom that there exists '*a friend beyond phenomena*' ['Stoics and sceptics' 1913, Edwyn R Bevan as referred to by Murray in his 1915 lecture] – that is a state of being that is known by many names by many different cultures but is to be seen as referring to a singular state that is common to all cultures over the ages. Within Stoicism many words are used to describe this 'friend' – God, the Logos, the divine spirit or fire, Nature (translated from the Greek word 'Phusis' which implies that Nature is living, evolutionary and rational) and many other such terms. In keeping with Zeno's rationale, the fact that such an idea is a 'common perception' of humankind gives it credence. It is part of the common wisdom of our species – the wisdom that says that all of this natural organisation we see about us has to have some Cause – a cause that is more than '*a blip of organisation in a sea of chaos*'.

This is the second factor for accepting the Stoic beliefs in a deity. Pursuing knowledge through the study of the burgeoning natural sciences, in trying to understand the nature of the world in which they lived they looked around them and they saw organisation within the nature of the existence they experienced and so they reasoned that there had to be some 'thing' that coordinated this organisation. In speculating about how such an organising principle may operate within the physical world they talked about the 'finest of all matter out of which all other matter was manifested' – 'matter' where the passive principle and the active principle are to be seen as being co-mingled or are to be seen as two qualities of the one 'substance' and where the active principle is a Consciousness that permeates the whole Cosmos.

While this belief in God as '*the universal governor and organiser of all things*' was based on passed down wisdom and theories arrived at from simple observation, modern science has come up with the study needed to give support to the speculation.

What started out as a speculative assumption has today been given grounds to see such as a rational belief.

Stoicism believes that the Cosmos is to be seen as the body of God and that we exist within and as part of this body. God is perceived as being the 'mind' that permeates the whole

physical Cosmos and as such is *'the universal governor and organiser of all things'*. And in that we are a part of the body of God, so also the Stoic rationale tells us that we contain within our being 'a spark' of the 'mind of God'.

'We do not need to uplift our hands towards heaven... as if in this way our prayers were more likely to be heard. God is near you, he is with you, he is within you... The holy spirit indwells within us. One who marks our good deeds and our bad deeds, and is our guardian. Indeed, no man can be good without the help of God. ... He it is that gives noble and upright counsel.' [XLI. On the God Within Us - 'Seneca Moral Essays' Translation by John W Basore.]

A pretty powerful starting point for arriving at a framework of beliefs on which to base one's rationale regards how life works and that leads to a rationale as to how life ought to be lived.

There is much within the teachings of Stoicism that has commonality with other beliefs and philosophies. But key to understanding Stoicism as a whole and to living as a Stoic is the internalising of the Stoic belief in the nature of God and in accepting that we, as individuals, are the 'children of God' and that to live our lives well is to live our life in accord with the will of God.

"For I regard God's will as better than my will. I shall attach myself to Him as a servant and follower, my choice is one with His, my desire one with His, in a word my will is one with His will." [IV.VII. 'Epictetus, the discourses as reported by Arrian, the Manual and Fragments' Translated by W A Oldfather.]

Bearing this in mind, Stoicism seeks out how we ought to live.

What is your art? To be good. And how is this accomplished well except by general principles, some about the nature of the universe, and others about the proper constitution of man? [XI.5. 'The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus' Translated by C R Haines.]

And here we are told that first and foremost the would be Stoic wants to be 'good' and that we can learn how to live as 'children of God' from the knowledge that thrusts itself into our minds through our senses and the knowledge that is the 'common perceptions or beliefs' of humankind (seen as the ever developing knowledge of humankind together with the wisdom that has been passed down over the ages). If we look at matters aright, the nature of the world about us tells us how we ought to live so as not to be in conflict with the nature of Existence as a whole or with our own nature as reasoning social animals.

This is the practical rather than intellectual approach that Stoicism offers us.

All of this is the core understandings from which Stoic ethics are derived. The foundation of Stoic ethics is grounded in the recognition of the oneness of all around us in that all is manifested out of the body of God and the subsequent realisation, that wherever we have influence as individuals, that the good of the whole is what we ought to aim for.

'All things are mutually intertwined, and the tie is sacred, and scarcely anything is alien the one to the other. For all things have been ranged side by side, and together help to order one ordered Universe. For there is both one Universe, made up of all things, and one God immanent in all things,... and one Law, one Reason common to all intelligent creatures, and one Truth.' [VII.9. 'The Communings with Himself of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus' Translated by C R Haines.]

Just as it was in ancient Athens, still today through the Stoic rationale it becomes obvious that each individual best serves themselves if they serve as many of the levels of society and Existence that they are part of as their circumstance will allow. Within Stoicism, care and concern for oneself is only considered as being what is needed in order to try to ensure that, as individuals, we can best serve the greater good.

But of course, as with any 'tool', if we are to best serve the whole we need to ensure that we have been well 'honed'.

'The happy life... is a life that is in harmony with its own nature, and it can be attained in only one way. First of all, we must have a sound mind and one that is in constant possession of its sanity; second, it must be courageous and energetic, and, too, capable of the noblest fortitude, ready for every emergency, careful of the body and of all that concerns it, but without anxiety; lastly, it must be attentive to all the advantages that adorn life – the user, but not the slave, of the gifts of Fortune.' ['On the Happy Life iii' 'Seneca Moral Essays' Translation by John W Basore.]

Note: In this context the word 'happy' is a misleading translation of the Greek word 'eudaimonia' which is more correctly translated as 'being possessed of good spirits'. 'Happy' has at its root the word 'hap' which relates to chance and so happiness is an *emotional* reactions to chance external events. Whereas for Stoicism 'being of good spirits' relates to a stable ongoing resilience and inner state of mind. Zeno described 'eudaimonia' as 'living in the smooth flow of life', and such may be better recognised as the state of being contented with 'what is' while still striving to partake in maintaining or improving the wellbeing of the whole as best as we are able.

In order to live a life in accord with the above, there is the need for the individual to be able to see reality for what it is and this requires some degree of dispassionate observation and study. Such is an ongoing life discipline. Basically, the more appropriate knowledge a person has, the better will be their decisions as to how to live their individual lives in relationship to the whole.

In Stoicism, the ethics or morality of how to live is inseparable from the physical nature of Existence in that the ethics is arrived at by the logical and reasoned assessment of one's roles in the play of life in relationship to all else that is presented to us on the stage of life by way of 'scenery', 'props' and other 'actors'. The Stoic's aim is to learn from the life they find themselves in so as to be better able to 'adlib' as best as they can by developing their skill as an actor in that the play is not written in stone. The Playwright has offered us the means to

discern the general direction they want the play to progress while leaving us the scope to use our skill as actors to help better progress the play as it is intended.

Bill Anders, lunar module pilot of Apollo 8, the first human spaceflight to leave Earth's orbit, said he felt that a real legacy of the mission to visit the moon was "Earthrise", the photo taken by the crew showing humanity's home planet hanging in the blackness of space above the lunar horizon. Crewmate Jim Lovell said of the actual experience of an Earthrise: "When I looked at the Earth itself... I started to wonder why I was here, what's my purpose here...", he said. "And my perspective is that God has given mankind a stage on which to perform. How the play turns out, is up to us."
[Apollo 8: Christmas On the Far Side of the Moon broadcast on 5 Live on 24 December 2018 at 20:00 GMT.]

These observations go part way to expressing the Stoic viewpoint. However, for the Stoic, God is still actively involved with us in that God is an integral and ever present part of the Existence in which we exist, and how the play works out will be better for Mother Earth, and so for us, if we work with God. It is better to work with Mother Nature than against her. And here 'Mother Nature' is a modern translation of the original Greek word Phusis where Phusis was seen in Stoicism as being another aspect of the living God.

This recognition of the oneness of all and that all is intertwined leads the Stoic to a rational assessment of how to live, with particular attention to the fact that 'rationale' has at its root the word 'ratio'. Living life well is a matter of wisely balancing all sorts of influences according to the ratio of their relevance while also being aware of the influence we can have.

It is obvious that, at present, beyond our planet we can have little influence. Where we can best apply our craft of living life well as individuals Stoics is on our planet. Regardless of what influence our roles in life may allow us to have, by living the Stoic life we are more likely to influence matters for the good, even if it is only through living life in a manner that others will view as being the actions of a person of good character whereby they may feel inclined to try to emulate our way of life and so help bring about the betterment of society as a whole.

We become Stoics, not to benefit ourselves, but to train ourselves to live in a manner whereby, given the opportunity, we will benefit those around us. And it is our belief in God and in the nature of the Cosmos as the body of God that provides the grounding that will help us to try to stick to our chosen path throughout our lives - come what may.

Stoicism is always about the greater good. We train to improve our practical wisdom in the hope that we may better understand how we need to act in order to be of help rather than a hindrance in such a project.

Unfortunately, together with the other schools of Athens, the Stoics of old got pulled into the question of 'the sage' – the perfectly wise person. The sage was not an invention of the Stoics. It was a technical intellectual standardised idea used in those days to discuss how 'the perfect person' would think and live if they followed this or that school's teachings. Together with other similar debating points the Stoics were expected to be able to provide answers to such issues. They found themselves trying to address the issue of 'the sage' in their writings, even though it was seen by Stoics that such ideas were often irrelevant in that the chasing after such an ideal is an impossibility.

Many in the Stoic community today argue that the 'ideal' that the concept of 'the sage' sets is needed to drive them on to seek to improve by offering them a target to aim for. And yet perversely they will also agree that sagehood is next to being an impossible state, if not a total impossibility state - in which case their target is unachievable by mere mortals.

Not one of the Stoics of old, or anyone of the other schools, ever claimed to have achieved sagehood, so none were in a position to teach how to achieve such. In fact Stoicism does not teach a path to sagehood. It teaches a path that the person in the street can follow that will make them a better person – that is, a person of greater benefit to all around them than they would have been without their Stoic training and beliefs.

'This is the mean of which I approve; our life should observe a happy medium between the ways of a sage and the ways of the world at large; all men should admire it, but they should understand it also.' [V. 'The Philosopher's Mean', 'Seneca Epistulae Morales' Translation by Richard M Gummere.]

Not only should they understand it, but they must also be able to see that the Stoic life is achievable.

Following the Stoic rationale, it is to be seen that Stoicism is lived moment by moment and that at any moment the Stoic may just manage to think, say and do just the right thing in accord with their knowledge and their correct use of that knowledge. This is what wisdom is and wisdom is the key character that the Stoic is trying to develop, where the four cardinal characters or virtues are just different aspects of the one character, namely wisdom. If you are acting wisely you will be living up to all the other characters as needed.

The Stoic does not aim to become the sage. They instead aim, moment by moment, to live in accord with Nature, where such can be unpacked as:

Living moment by moment mindful of the Stoic beliefs and teachings, mindful of the individual Stoic's aim to learn how to live by looking to their examined knowledge of their own nature and their examined knowledge of the Nature of all around them – that is, their knowledge about the nature of life 'seen in all of its nakedness' - and mindful of their aim to fulfil all of their rolls in life to the benefit of society and of the Cosmos as best as their nature, abilities and circumstance will allow them.

Stoicism recognises that we are human. We will not get it right one hundred percent of the time.

We will not always be able to hold our concentration so as to be fully mindful at all times. What matters is how quickly our training will allow us to regain our mindful stance whereby, if our inattentiveness is leading us down inappropriate paths, our wisdom and our reason can lead us back to a path in harmony with Nature.

Our nature as animals is part of how we live and our instincts will lead us down paths that our reason has not had time to choose. What matters is how quickly we are able to bring to bear our training and beliefs so as to enable our reasoning faculty to confirm or correct the path our instincts have taken us on.

Our nature as animals will allow an unexamined feeling or impression to jump into our minds and possibly lead to involuntary, in the moment, reactions. What matters is how quickly we can bring our reasoning faculty to bear so as to recover from any temporary reaction, such as the 'shock' that can be elicited by a loud unexpected noise.

In similar manner some inappropriate 'opinion' embedded deep inside of our mind may surface in reaction to some event so leading to feelings that may swamp our reasoning faculty and so lead to actions that are not in accord with Nature. And this is at the heart of much of the Stoic training to achieve a sound mind – how to cleanse the mind of as many inappropriate 'opinions' as possible by looking to rationally examine them in light of our Stoic beliefs and cold reason, so being able to see the naked facts free from our 'emotional baggage'.

It is here that the Stoic can make most progress by breaking down old inappropriate mind patterns and habituating a new Stoic mind-set that will allow the natural feelings of affection and the like to flourish while holding at bay the more violent, aggressive, feelings (perturbations) that will not answer to the rule of conscious reason – a reason that is looking to live in accord with Nature.

Habituation of ensuring the rule of conscious reason is what is behind much of the Stoic mind training, but such is of use to the bad person as much as to the wise person. What takes the Stoic training to the next level - that of aiming to be good - is the Stoic framework of beliefs in God and the nature of the Cosmos that form the grounding for how we see the world around us and our part within it.

Stoicism is not aiming for us to become the ideal sage. It is aiming for us to become a better human being – a being that is an animal that can be rational and reasoning and above all is a social animal by nature. It is not that we aim to 'make' the world a better place. It is that we 'try' to do so in the full knowledge that we cannot control the overall flow of change that is Existence, albeit that we may be able to bring some influence to bear whereby the flow of change may be all the better as a result of our input or at the very least may hopefully be none the worse.

The Stoic aims to be part of the solution as against being part of the problem.

This does not require that we become the impossible 'ideal sage'. It just requires that we try our best as much as we possibly can given our individual nature, our ability and circumstance. Following Zeno's rationale tells us that living as a Stoic is an achievable aim, even today.

However I have been careful to talk of following Zeno's rationale because such does not involve sticking to the sciences of his day or of tying ourselves down to ancient technical use of concepts that require that we are fully conversant with the ancient Greek language or its usage. Seneca tells us not to get too tied up in individual words but rather that we need to see the overall intent of what is being said.

Zeno's Stoicism tells us to follow Nature and as such Zeno's rationale is telling us that Stoicism needs to keep up with advancing knowledge about the nature of Existence. At the same time the rationale tells us to follow the 'common perceptions' of humankind – the wisdom passed down over the ages. Advancing knowledge ensures that we do not stagnate in a state of not investigating further, while the wisdom of the ages ensures that we do not jump on every bandwagon that claims to be providing improved knowledge.

So what we look to as Stoicism today needs to have its roots clearly in the Stoicism of old, especially regards those matters that do not change with time – such as our relationship to God. To drop such basic Stoic beliefs is to negate the whole of Stoicism.

But such does not stop us reworking some of the Stoic ideas so that they marry with advancing knowledge, such as the advances in cosmology and the like. Nor does it stop us from rewording some of the Stoic ideas in order to make such matters clear to the modern person. After all, there are many of the ancient Greek words that do not easily translate into our modern languages. In many cases we need to start from basics and rework the explanations and understandings while ensuring that we keep to the Stoic rationale that all of the Stoic teachings form a part of a singular whole that will enable the Stoic to know how to live life.