

Thinking like a Stoic by Nigel Glassborow April 2019 thestoa@hotmail.co.uk

If one believes in the Stoic metaphysics and its rationale then many issues will be seen from a different perspective to that which is prevalent today.

All too often ideas are centred around some simple slogan that is meant to encapsulate some way of seeing life in a manner that will supposedly be of benefit to 'the individual' should such ideas come to fruition. However such tends to lead people into 'camps' that start demanding that the whole of society should adapt to follow their minority view – a view that is often not based on a rational overview of the nature of life as a whole and that often leads to a 'them and us' outlook that is contrary to the 'inclusion' that such ideas are meant to engender in the whole of society.

Naturally we Stoics do not think that we are going to fall into such a way of thinking despite the fact that we are united in the acceptance of the simple slogan, '*Live in accord with Nature*' where we see Nature as the manifestation of the will of God.

What hopefully prevents us from believing that everyone else must convert to our way of thinking is our belief that each person must think matters through rationally according to their nature, and not to follow blindly. As to if a person is unable to accept the Stoic view of the God that is revealed through the Stoic metaphysics, and instead has other beliefs, this is not the concern of any individual Stoic. The Stoic's only concern is that they themselves live up to their chosen beliefs.

Stoicism is not a belief system that is enhanced by seeking to convert others to Stoicism. 'Quality rather than quantity' is the watch word. As Mahatma Gandhi is reported as saying,

"I came to the conclusion long ago that all religions were true and that also that all had some error in them, and while I hold by my own religion, I should hold other religions as dear as Hinduism. So we can only pray, if we were Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu; but our innermost prayer should be that a Hindu should become a better Hindu, a Muslim a better Muslim, and a Christian a better Christian."

The Stoic's aim is become a better Stoic. It is not to convert others to Stoicism.

OK, we write about our faith and 'put it out there' for others to consider. Primarily we write for ourselves in order to clarify our own individual take on Stoicism and hence how we are choosing to try to live our lives. At the same time we are trying to keep Stoicism alive in that we do not see it as some professors see it – as an 'interesting' ancient philosophy that supposedly died out when Christianity came on the scene. For the Stoic Stoicism is still very much alive and relevant to life today.

Through offering our views and through reading the views of other Stoics we share our ideas so that we do not stray far from the path as laid down by Zeno. Continuity and change is the nature of Existence. So also is the nature of Stoicism.

And if along the way we pique the interest of others and such helps them on their journey through life, all well and good. Hopefully such may enable them to feel more comfortable in their own faith. If however, for whatever reason, through reading both the writings of the ancient and the contemporary Stoics a person turns to Stoicism then that is to be their choice. The Stoic does not seek to overly convince others.

In restating Stoicism we seek to ensure that our faith is maintained and kept relevant by looking to how advances in knowledge may reflect on some of our ideas. We seek to share in the duty that our faith lays on us in that our faith tells us that it is our own individual responsibility to try to perform our roles in the play of life as best as we can while always trying 'to better our own personal best.'

A Stoic becomes a better Stoic by rationally and critically thinking about our Stoic beliefs. However in such study it is the Stoic belief in the nature of the deity, the Stoic metaphysics and its many other interconnected principles that are the foundation that all issues are referred back to. In all issues we are guided to start from basics – seeing all as a Oneness, accepting 'what is' and appropriately striving in a manner that is in keeping with the actions of a person of good character. So when it comes down to it, a Stoic becomes a better Stoic by actually living in accord with their beliefs.

As an example of how a Stoic may see matters contrary to the popular view, from the Stoic perspective 'human rights' are the wrong way of looking at matters. 'Rights' are to lay responsibility on others 'to do what is necessary to respect one's rights', whereas the Stoic is encouraged to accept 'what is' and to see that if others do not offer 'due respect' such is something that is outside of our sphere of influence.

So the Stoic would not normally look to '*protecting their rights*'.

What the Stoic has influence over is their own responsibilities to others, be it to individuals, society, the State, or even to animals, etcetera. Such responsibilities are governed by the Stoic's individual nature, their beliefs and their view of the ratio of responsibilities that their various roles in life demand of them – that is if they are to fulfil such roles to the best of their ability.

The Stoic may then, by extension, look to discussing the responsibilities that they may reasonably consider to be aspects of various roles in life – such as the responsibility of the State to its citizens, the responsibility of a business to its clients and so on. If the Stoic is in a position to influence such an attitude and policy in any of society's organisations, all well and good. It may then be that bodies and organisations within society can be influenced to move from that of looking to what 'rights' individuals have demanded to that of looking at and living up to their own responsibilities to those individuals and to society in general - such as

their responsibility to pay their taxes to the State for the benefit of society as a whole without trying to be 'creative' in their avoidance of such taxes – where hopefully the State will live up to its responsibilities to care for the wellbeing of its citizenry and to govern society well as is appropriate.

Looking at matters from the point of view of 'responsibilities' makes so much more sense than many demands for 'rights' do. In fact demands for 'rights' are divisive and set people against people – often one group's 'rights' end up infringing another group's 'rights'. Whereas 'responsibility' is a cooperative matter in that every member of society, regardless of their role and status in life, may be seen as sharing in the responsibilities of society at all of its levels. Consideration is then as to what they, as individuals, bring to their roles by way of what they are responsible for as a result of that role and what influence they may bring to bear and how they ought to share in any group responsibilities.

So much better to request that a person or organisation live up to their responsibilities than to accuse them of 'trampling all over my rights'. The one asks them to live up to being a person of 'good character' or an organisation of 'good repute', while the other sets them up as being 'the enemy' and so drives them into a defensive position.

So much better to ask how they can help to solve a situation, than to accuse them of being the cause of the situation. If something has gone wrong, better to accept matters as they are and to seek cooperation in moving on.

All very Stoic in attitude.

As a result of applying the Stoic ways in this manner many issues will often be seen in a new light, especially if we look to the reality of the situation and accept the nature of 'what is' rather than trying to implement some intellectualised idealistic opinion as to 'how things ought to be'. Aiming for what is 'right and proper' through acceptance and appropriate striving is the Stoic way.

Looking to some popular issues, just as the Stoic will avoid looking to their 'rights', a Stoic will not demand 'equality' in that they know that no person is equal in every respect to any other person. We are all individuals.

After all, in certain respects no 'man' can be equal to a 'woman' in that he does not, by nature, have a womb. Their different physiology demands that they be treated differently – as and when such different treatment is appropriate. Also, Stoicism accepts that 'life is not fair'. Fate does not bestow on us all an equal share of the 'gifts of Fortune' – be it position, wealth, health or anything else. The Stoic looks to ensuring that they treat others in a just and appropriate manner for such is within their sphere of influence. We are grateful for whatever comes our way, be it bounty, sufficiency or dearth. But we do not expect or desire equality for such is something that is not fully within our sphere of influence.

When it comes to animal welfare, the Stoic will look to the fact that there is by nature a food-chain and that we are by nature omnivores. Eating or not eating meat is a matter of circumstance. It is not a moral issue. If it was, God would have made all animals vegetarians.

After all, those who live in the furthest northern reaches would have died out years ago if they did not eat meat, in that the climate allows for very little by way of vegetation. Most near-vegetarian diets are to be found closer to the equator where less energy is needed for keeping warm and only the occasional meat eating is needed in order to have a complete natural diet. I talk of 'near-vegetarian diets' in that the traditional diets of the world are rarely true vegetarian diets. Looking to arguments put forward by most vegetarian and vegan organisations, the arguments are often, in part, based on some intellectual misconception or on emotional consideration that talk of animal welfare, deforestation and other such issues.

Certainly what matters when it comes to animal welfare is that we ensure that any hunting or farming of animals is done with care. The hunted animal ought to be dispatched as quickly as possible. Any farmed animal ought to be cared for appropriately so that they do not suffer unduly during their lifetime and their death ought to be as painless as is possible. But such is to be undertaken against the background that Nature has evolved us to eat meat as well as vegetation. A purely vegan diet sets us in thrall to 'big business' regards the need for dietary supplements, artificial fertilisers, etcetera.

We have to be rational about such matters. Arguments about how less land would be used if we all became vegans are false arguments. Some animals feed off land that is not appropriate for any other form of farming. The quality of the soil needed for growing many foods requires that the growing of vegetation for human consumption and the feeding of animals is rotated on the same land whereby the animal excrement provides the natural fertilisation and soil enhancement that is needed to grow the vegetation. To do otherwise, to grow only vegetation, would be to degrade our long term ability to feed the population and also lead to whole species of farm animals having to be wiped out to provide the extra land needed for a purely vegan diet.

So in looking to what is rational, the Stoic is liable to see meat eating as a distraction, when the real issue regards depletion of the natural environment as farming expands is the number of humans on the planet - it is not rational to try to find yet more ways to feed an ever growing population.

Population control is a natural stance for any Stoic. Nature tries her best. She produces a percentage of humans that are not able to reproduce. She produces a percentage of humans that are not attracted to their opposite sex so, in theory, reducing the number of couples who are liable to reproduce. She ensures that after a period of time our bodies degrade and we die. Yet we try to combat all of these controls. We try to go against Nature and look to IVF and other methods to provide children for those who were not born to have any. We hold onto life well beyond what ought to be our natural life span so not making way for the next generation. Like Zeno, we ought to be ready to leave life when Nature calls.

In all of these aspects Stoicism tells us that all is the individual's choice. However it also tells us, as individuals, to have consideration for the whole of society and not just look to our own selfish desires.

These are just some of the factors that a Stoic will look at. What decisions each Stoic may arrive at will be in accord with their overall individual beliefs and well thought out choices.

If one can live without causing harm to others so much the better. But one has to be clear as to what is meant by harm. If choosing not to eat meat means the extinction of the very farm animals that have been bred to be farm animals the issue gets clouded. If every effort is to be made to bring as many children into the world as possible while also every effort is to be made to keep people alive as long as possible we are working against Nature and not with her. 'Kindness' without thought can cause a conundrum.

So it is that Stoicism is not for everyone as the logic that its teachings lead to are not to the taste of all – even if the logic is sound and at times needs to be shouted from the rooftops.

The claim that Stoic thought relies on the Stoic belief in God and the Stoic metaphysics is not to say that non-Stoics cannot arrive at the same conclusions based on their beliefs. What it is to say is, that for the Stoic any conclusion they may arrive at is most likely to be correct if it does not contradict the overall Stoic view of life. Through our knowledge of the ever present God that permeates the whole Cosmos, and the fact that we are one with our God, we are better able to stick to our principles and to follow a rational course through life that will be for the betterment of society – even when such may appear, to others, to be to our own individual detriment.