

*celsæ graviore casu decidunt turres*<sup>1</sup>  
Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>  
The Philosophies of Life 3



## Stoics and Eclectics

### 6 Stoicism: The philosophers of the Porch

We looked briefly at stoicism last week now here are the full details.

Stoicism seems a more noble philosophy and attitude than many that we have looked at so far. Its emphasis on duty, self control and indifference to pain and passion are appealing.

The most famous Stoics were:

Zeno (340-265BC) This is a different Zeno the Eleatic whom we met earlier.

Cleanthes, Κλεάνθης (c. 330 BC – c. 230 BC) This may be the poet quoted in Acts 17. However similar words also occur in another poem, the *Phaenomena* of Aratus.<sup>3</sup>

Chrysippus, Χρύσιππος (c. 279 – c. 206 BC)

Panateus, Παναίτιος (c. 185 – c. 110/109 BC) fl150BC

Antipater of Tarsus, Αντίπατρος (d.130 or 129 BC)

Arius Didymus, Ἄρειος Δίδυμος (fl. 1st century BC) 25BC

Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BC – AD 65) you will have seen quotations from Seneca already heading some of these pages.

Epictetus Ἐπίκτητος (c. 55 – 135 AD) The best known later stoic and a contemporary to the New Testament.

Marcus Aurelius(121 – 180 AD) A Roman emperor.<sup>4</sup> He is pictured above.

Stoicism developed out of Cynicism. It takes its name from the fact that early Stoics met in a covered porch or walkway known in Greek as a στοά. You will recall that cynics said you should

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1 High towers fall with a greater crash. - The higher the tower the greater the fall thereof. Horace.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnw.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 See next week's Bible lesson.

4 Find him on your Synchronological Chart of History.

adjust to adversity with an attitude of passive indifference. They thought that since you cannot adjust outward circumstances you should adjust your inward feelings and desires. They aimed to attain passive indifference. This principle was something that the Stoics also held.

Stoicism emphasised self control and indifference to worldly affairs. Evil, said the Stoics, is a failure to let reason control your passions. They believed that there is a λόγος or Reason that permeates nature (like Heraclitus) and it controls everything that takes place. Virtue for the Stoics meant getting in tune with reason and harmonising with the *logos* in all things. “Time is a sort of river of passing events, and strong is its current; no sooner is a thing brought to sight than it is swept by and another takes its place, and this too will be swept away,” said Marcus Aurelius. We might say “Go with the flow.”<sup>5</sup>

When your passions fight against reason, said the Stoics, *you* are fighting against reason. Man is to conquer the world by first conquering his own impulses and getting control of his passions. You conquer the world by conquering yourself. Stoics aimed to show utter indifference to pleasure and pain. This allowed them to say that external things cannot control them any more and passion could not carry them away. You must, they said, fit into the flow of things and be very rational. Stoic advocated a “stiff upper lip” or soldierly attitude. “Whatever is is right,” as Alexander Pope would say much later on in history.

Roman emperors loved this philosophy because it creates a very compliant people, prepared to suffer whatever is imposed on them. It was especially useful when it came to soldiers who will not be pulled aside but carry on regardless of suffering. This all seems rather noble and dutiful.

Stoic morality was “natural” that is, not tied to any belief in the gods. Although Epictetus, for example, often mentions Zeus (Roman Jupiter) he was probably signalling a more pantheistic idea such as “Nature” or “Reason” rather than the chief deity of Classical mythology. Today there are still many people with this attitude. However, it does not stand up to scrutiny. If “Reason” is in control and whatever happens is what is right, what justification is there for resisting your passions since they arise naturally? Does “Reason” approve of deeds such as those of Hitler since everything that happens is “right”?

## 7. Eclectic Philosophers

The Eclectics took a little from every philosophy according to what seemed good to them. They had no new principle or system, just a mixture. The most famous was Cicero (106-43BC), an insightful orator who took a little stoicism, Epicureanism, Platonism<sup>6</sup> as it seemed good to him. His writings are still read today and often come up as set books in IGCSE Latin.

The practice of eclecticism is also very common today. Many people have no system in their thinking, picking out what they like from various ideas and making a mixture that is often internally inconsistent.

There are only so many different ideas in philosophy. All the ideas we have looked at so far come round and round through the ages and are still present today.

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5 An expression originating in the 1960s.

6 See later lesson.