

*Cives magistratibus pareant, magistratus legibus.*¹

Classical Thought²



The Roman Empire and Classical Thought: Stoicism (1) - Zeno

Zeno (b336BC)³

Zeno came from Citium in Cyprus and in 320BC went to Athens to study. This was around the time of Aristotle's death. Around 300BC he founded his own school of philosophy known as the *Stoa* from the Greek word for “porch” since it was in such a porch that he held his school. He was especially impressed with Socrates⁴ about whom he learned. Plato had developed Socrates' interest in dialectic⁵ and universal and absolute forms for morality.⁶ Zeno was more interested in Socrates' epistemological and metaphysical teaching that concerned lifestyle and ethics.

The Cynics⁷ were also Socrates' disciples. They were more impressed with his life itself, particularly his independence of character and indifference to circumstances. They followed Socrates' belief that no harm could come to a truly good man. However, it does seem that bad things happen to good people and so the Cynics drew the conclusion that these things were therefore not really bad then and should be accepted with passive indifference. They taught that if we suffer pain, poverty and even death we should accept it just as Socrates did and be indifferent to what happens to you.

Zeno agreed with this part of Cynic teaching. However, the Cynics were led into antisocial behaviour and they endorsed power politics and even anarchy. Zeno did not agree with Cynic ideas on this.

Zeno's Epistemology

Zeno held that everything we know is based on perception. Our minds are blank and sensations impress themselves on our blank minds and leave something there. He said that the *forms* did not exist in a Platonic realm beyond time and space nor embedded in the particulars themselves as

¹ Let the citizen obey the magistrate and the magistrate the laws. Anon.

² These lessons are derived 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.cmfnow.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 Not to be confused with the pre-Socratic philosopher of the same name: see Term 1 Week 5 Day 4.

⁴ See Term 2 Week 4 Day 4

⁵ See Term 2 Week 4 Day 4

⁶ See Term 2 Week 6 Day 4

⁷ See Term 2 Week 1 Day 4

Aristotle thought. Rather, he said, there is no *form*. The universals we think of are nothing but a construction of our minds, the result of mental activity. He held that *only* matter was real. How did he account for ideas such as goodness or badness then? He was willing to say that goodness and badness must be in some sense bodily realities. This seems rather absurd. Zeno held that matter is a particular kind of body: it is fire. He called also this fire God. This is similar to Heraclitus.⁸ Zeno developed Heraclitus' ideas by incorporating details of the physical theory of nature etc. from Aristotle.

In the areas of metaphysics or epistemology Zeno contributed nothing new. His unique contribution was in ethical matters. Zeno said that every creature's *purpose* defines its highest good. That is: every creature has a nature (as Aristotle taught) and every creature's good or ethical direction comes by pursuing its true nature. To Zeno knowledge was valuable to man only when it was useful to us. When it helps us discover our true nature so we can fit in to the universe, he said, knowledge is good. Zeno thought the universe was a deterministic system but he did not believe it was a blind system as the Atomists had thought. Rather he considered that there was an intelligent *λόγος* (*Logos*) that permeated the universe almost like divine providence. The universe, according to Zeno, behaves in accordance with a law, a *λόγος*, and it is one that we can understand with the human mind. Zeno taught that the universe displays orderliness because of the *λόγος* that permeates it and he considered that our minds can know this *λόγος* or order.

This reasoning enabled Zeno to criticise political institutions, the state of his day, that did not live up to their true purpose. Since everything has a purpose, he argued, so does the political order. If it was not living up to reason in its actions or objectives, therefore, it could be criticised. This view of politics can still be seen today when people judge what happens in the political sphere not by the standards of God's revelation in the Bible but by asking, "what would be a reasonable option?"

The Cosmopolis

Zeno said you can criticise the activities and decisions of the state on the basis of a higher law, i.e. reason, which permeates the natural world and which we can know with our minds since political actions can be evaluated in terms of universal law of reason. All men were subject to the law of reason, in Zeno's view, and so all men were brothers. He therefore promoted the idea of the universal fellowship of men or the universal city or world city or *cosmopolis*. This idea was of benefit to Imperial Rome while the Roman Empire was growing because the Roman Empire could be seen as an external manifestation of this world state or *cosmopolis* of which all men were citizens.

Stoics are also remembered for their teaching of the primacy of duty in ethics. Ethics, they said, had nothing to do with personal benefits or consequences. Duty is duty. You should do your duty for duty's sake. Happiness for the Stoic was peace of mind which comes from accepting the universe as it is. One should therefore be indifferent to one's emotions. The Stoic lifestyle therefore became one of extreme asceticism and denial of the body. Moral discipline, abstinence and denial of things that give pleasure was the rule for the Stoic. Zeno recommended an apathetic lifestyle of passive indifference to events.

In the next lesson we will look at how Stoicism developed in the Roman Empire and its relationship with Eclecticism.