
THE STOIC COSMOPOLIS: A VISION OF JUSTICE AND VIRTUE IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

T L Tsolis

University of Athens

The philosophical movements which evolved under circumstances of interaction of socio-political and cultural elements during late Hellenistic and early Roman times are characterised by a strong interest in social problems, a humanistic perspective and a desire for involvement in politics, with the intention of correcting wrongs. Cynics, Sceptics, Epicureans and Stoics become sensitive recipients of the changes taking place at the time and lay the foundations for a new era in philosophy.¹

The Stoic thinkers in particular put forward original ideas, which will exert enormous influence on the political and moral thinking of the years to follow as well as pinpointing the change in the orientation of philosophy itself. This is because, through the expansion of the Stoic worldview and moral understanding, philosophy ceases, perhaps for the first time, to be egocentric, ceases to have the character of a cast of experts or initiates, and begins to make a social contribution. It begins to live in history, to reach its peak and decay within the state organisation it is going to serve and finally to struggle with actions as well as words to dissolve the black clouds threatening humanity, clouds which try every human system, which, when it reaches its full evolution, demands very careful handling so as not to be led to its own destruction.

Contemporary philosophical research, in an effort to position itself before current socio-political problems, can, in our opinion, greatly benefit from the study of the Stoic social-philosophical ideals, which, despite their austerity, have a clearly humanistic orientation. This orientation consists firstly in the conscious expansion of the scope of human communication by means of abolishing discrimination by sex, origin, nationality and possessions, and secondly in the extension of philosophical thought towards the *cosmopolis*, which had already started to acquire the characteristics of a modern ecumene.

The world in which Stoic thinkers lived displays some similarity to certain aspects of a modern multicultural society. The decline of a

dominant political system and its replacement with a new state structure is a phenomenon which, regardless of the era in which it takes place, causes a concomitant change in the social role of man, in his political conscience, as well as his cognitive and psychological constitution.² Let us imagine a man who is engulfed in a closed community, whose members are bound by their common origin, tradition, morals, laws and education. Such a man may feel safe within his engulfment and regard people belonging to a different culture as barbarians, that is radically different and distant, whether they are subordinate subjects or feared dynasts against whom he has to protect his way of life. If, however, a historical condition should lead to the abolition of the above mentioned state structure, then this man faces an extremely pressing situation, whereby he must live and communicate in harmony on a socio-political and cultural level with all those different and barbaric people who have a different colour, religion and culture and suddenly find themselves to be his fellow citizens in a city with borders that are far more extended than those he was used to. It is easy to correlate this hypothetical situation not only to the era when the man of the city-state initially becomes a citizen of the multi-ethnic Hellenistic states and later of the ecumenical, so to speak, Roman empire, but also to our own era, when the man who lives within a certain state structure is expected to live together with the ethnic and cultural minorities that live in the same state, and later to participate as an equal member in multinational coalitions and federations of states with an ecumenical character.

The Stoic concept of the *cosmopolis* came as a response to the problems and conflicts caused by the special circumstances affecting the state structure in Hellenistic years and contains the humanistic vision of certain Stoic thinkers concerning the foundation of a state of justice and virtue on a multicultural social basis.³ The issue which we must address to begin with is which principles of Stoic thinking led to the concept of the *cosmopolis* itself.

The cosmopolitanism or ecumenicalism of the Stoa basically originates in three main positions, founded in ontology and cosmology. These positions are the position on panhuman affinity, the position on the natural equality of humans and the position on the natural sociability of humans.⁴

Panhuman affinity is cosmologically proven according to the Stoics on the basis of the relationship between human and cosmic essence.⁵ Because humans take part, to a certain extent, in cosmic

essence, that is they are rational active factors that are related to the supreme ruling power, the cosmic essence – god, it follows that they are closely related among themselves. This affinity, based on the criterion of essence, is panhuman and does not exclude any race, ethnic or social group.

The position on the natural equality between humans originates in the aforementioned affinity based on the criterion of essence and concerns the quality of all humans with regard to their cognitive potential and the right to freedom, reason and wish.

Finally, the position on natural sociability is an extension of the notion of natural co-affection from the ontological to the social level. The movement and interaction of beings on an ontological level are defined, according to the Stoics, by co-affection, which is the cosmic union of species due to the divine spirit which runs through them. In the case of humans, however, the movement and interaction are based primarily on reason, which dictates the social orientation of the human species.⁶ In this way, co-affection itself is transformed to a kind of social union whereby man is inconceivably separated from society, since his own self-realisation is only achieved as a social goal.⁷

Each of these positions, which constitute the foundations of Stoic cosmopolitanism, has its respective practical dimensions on a clearly social level. The panhuman affinity leads to the demand for friendship and philanthropy, the natural equality results in a theory of human rights, while the natural sociability leads to positions on concord, the natural society and the social end-goal.⁸

More specifically, to begin with, the fact that all humans are related because, to an extent, they take part in essence makes self-evident the friendship among people who, following the Stoic teaching, make moral progress with the end goal of harmonisation with the creative essence-god. Secondly, the same position dictates a type of philanthropy towards any other humans who for various social, cultural or clearly personal reasons do not advance to a similar extent on a logical-ethical level and are thus deprived of the prospect of living in accordance with the dictates of the logical nature itself. However, as will be clarified in the analysis to follow, these positions should not lead to the conclusion that friendship and progress itself are considered the prerogative of a few people, nor that philanthropy is regarded as a panacea for the many who are inferior. The Stoa has a broader perspective and all people are

considered to have the right and the opportunity to improve themselves and their lives. Negative social and political circumstances function as defects, but eventually the progress of a man and the improvement of his own life are, according to the Stoics a clearly personal matter.

Seeking to examine now the Stoic theory of human rights, which emerges from the natural equality, we have to face the fact that the term "right" does not occur anywhere in Stoic thinking as a technical term. However, in agreement on this point with other researchers of Stoicism, we might claim that the Stoics were the first to clearly perceive of the more general dimension of rights as intrinsic features of human nature, even though they did not use a technical term to refer to those features.⁹ They did, thus, acknowledge natural rights in people simply because of the fact that they are human beings. The function per se of rational nature as a kind of divine legislator guaranteed, according to the Stoics, the validity of natural law. As for the participation of man as a rational active factor in the natural moral laws, it led to the acknowledgement of certain natural and inalienable rights. As such, natural rights can be considered the right to freedom and personal self-determination as well as the right to moral choice and improvement of individual psychological and cognitive characteristics, which concern the rational nature of man itself. On the contrary, the right to life, health, possession and others characterised by the Stoics as preferred indifferents, could not be considered natural rights, but rather rights relative to the prevailing social conventions. This, however, does not mean that the Stoics did not acknowledge the practical dimension of even those, so to speak, conventional rights. When they implore man to become active in society so as to attain moral achievements, they somehow acknowledge that the recipients of moral actions have some right to the results of such actions. For instance, when a man performs his moral duty by rescuing the life of a fellow human who is caught in a fire, initially he performs his natural right to moral choice and freedom of the effort to achieve his goal. At the same time the right to life of the man being rescued is acknowledged as a right that emerges from the combination of the rational moral duty and the natural right of the other with the prevailing legal conventions which dictate the protection of the life of the citizens, in the state in which both of the people involved in the moral act live.

It is evident then, that, according to the Stoics, natural sociability itself is in the end what assigns meaning to both friendship and philanthropy, as well as to the individual rights and

the moral activity dictated by duties. This is because it is only in an organised human society that the practical dimensions of natural affinity and natural equality acquire meaning, while the demand for concord, recognition of natural rights and social justice in general seems absolutely natural. By contrast, in a jungle of beings which devour one another, none of the above could have any significance. In reality of course, Stoic thinkers went even further in the development of their socio-political views. Their vision seems to have been in the end a natural society, within which humans could live in concord and harmony in order to realise their personal end-goal. The terms *cosmopolis* and *megalopolis* themselves seem to serve exactly this vision, that is the expansion of the boundaries of conventional societies so that a society can be formed that has natural rather than conventional unifying bonds and is thus destined for the whole of the human race.¹⁰ Within the framework of such a society, people would find the appropriate conditions to allow them to achieve their self-realisation, that is to live in accordance with their own nature, in harmony with the cosmic essence-god. At this point one might rightfully wonder whether the Stoic concept of the *cosmopolis* is after all this rather utopian theoretical construct and nothing more. The answer to this question is an important one and it leads us to face the essentially practical aspect of Stoic socio-political speculation.

The Stoic *cosmopolis* does not under any circumstances constitute an imaginary utopian concept; it is not a notion that has emerged without philosophical struggle, and it is based on solid arguments. The *cosmopolis* or *megalopolis*, like the Platonic Republic before it, is an ideal, that is a dynamic concept of principles which functions in an exemplary manner. When the Stoics visualise the cosmic city as a community of wise men who live in harmony and benefit in many ways from their co-existence and friendship, what they actually do is develop the principles which must act as models in order that the improvement of people's lives in individual societies can be achieved. Thus, the concord of the wise men is the model for the concord that has to exist in a human society, while the true friendship which can be found in the cosmic city must set the example for the people of an imperfect city with regard to their relationship with one another, relationships which should be based on spiritual communication, understanding, acceptance of weaknesses and help to one's neighbour. Finally, the natural law, which in the cosmic city becomes the absolute manifestation of the rational moral natures of all the citizens, must in a conventional city

be the lighthouse which guides the progressing human consciences towards moral attainment. The Stoic philosophers strongly believed that the change which would take place within individuals through their adjustment to certain absolute moral principles and natural laws is the one that would also right all the wrongs in their imperfect societies.¹¹

The Stoic teachers start their educational work from the basis of society, which is the individual himself, and conclude with the most extended social structure possible, the *cosmopolis*; in this way they express their great interest in man as an individual and not as a vehicle of financial or political power and they also prove that they are attempting to put into practice their original theory of social relationships, the theory of successive concentric circles. This theory is to be found in a fragment from Stobeus, which is ascribed to a contemporary of Epictetus, the Stoic Ierocles. It also occurs in Seneca, and before him in Cicero, who must have consulted even earlier sources. We may therefore consider fairly common in the Stoic circles this theory, which finds its most perfect expression in Ierocles.¹² According to this theory, man is enclosed within many circles which express the tension of social relationships. The smallest circle is that which contains the individual intellect and the largest is the one that contains the whole of the human race. Within the circles in between are contained, by order of nearness, the next of kin, the other relatives, the fellow citizens, those belonging to the same race, and those belonging to the same nation. The question for the Stoics was the equalisation of the difference in the tension of the bonds that the individual feels towards the members of the nearest and the most distant circles. In practice, this meant that each person must gradually become aware of the fact that the bonds which bind him with his fellow humans in general are equally close with the bonds that bind him with his next of kin. This image of the circles as a manifestation of social relationships may be somehow familiar nowadays. At the time, however, that it was expressed, it constituted an original perception, which served a very progressive ideology, Stoic ecumenism itself. The ideology in question, to use a term which may not be standard, but which is expressive, we believe, of the goals of the Stoa, triggers off the social practice of the Stoics itself.

Within the framework of this ideology it is possible to understand the reason why the Stoics supported the equality of the sexes and the races,¹³ because they objected to natural slavery and attributed the phenomenon of slavery to financial and social causes,

which were subject to change,¹⁴ as they believed in freedom of opinion and freedom of wish without any constraints. We can also understand why they saw the foundation of social change in personal self-realisation rather than the violent overthrow of regimes. Their toleration of certain tyrannical regimes is due mainly to the conviction that after the change has started within the man and extends to the surrounding social circles, at some point the regime itself will consist of people thinking in the right way, who can put into practice the vision of the wise state in the best possible way.¹⁵

In practice, the Stoic community consciously expanded in order to include many people who had been excluded from other philosophical schools, asking as a sole presupposition that these people should try to become better, by adhering to the strict moral principles and ways of the Stoa. The Stoic philosophers were the intellectual leaders of a mixed crowd of followers and supporters, the tutors to educated aristocrats, slaves and manual workers, craftsmen and women, artists and soldiers, and still had to provide a code of communication and education that was common to all. In other words, they had to provide a set of rules of virtue, which, if accepted, would assist in the intellectual development of all their pupils, regardless of their origin, race, and social, educational and psychological background.

The Stoic ideal of the Sage was the one that played the role of a code of communication among the proponents of the stoic worldview. However, the notorious austerity of this ideal gave rise to a number of misunderstandings of Stoic teachings as well as to the turn of Stoicism towards an unwanted elitism, which in the latest historical period of Stoicism cost the Stoics the loss of the lower strata of society, which turned to simpler ideologies and beliefs addressing the emotion rather than the intellect. All this is, however, part of another story or scholarly analysis.

What remains a fact is that in an era when the manner of philosophising was expressive of the manner of living and vice versa, the Stoics fought a hard struggle to affect political developments and social ideologies and stances. In some cases they succeeded, in others they failed. They convinced people of the modernity of their philosophy as well as of its difficulty. Well aware of human nature, they refused to deal with the simple and familiar things and chose the hard road of awakening that part of the human which touches upon the absolute and the divine. Thus, they invested

in the human factor and remained great visionaries until the end of the Stoic historical era.

Nowadays, as citizens of a new *cosmopolis*, we can still listen to the voices of those great visionaries from the past. Those Stoic voices, which never ceased to travel through the centuries, can still talk to us about the place where an important, divine part of ourselves is hiding, they can still talk about how far we can all reach if we work together to build a better tomorrow; and they can tell us about what a truly free, just and virtuous world should be like.

Notes

1. See also Chronis, N, 1988, *Οι Μετασχηματισμοί της Φιλοσοφίας. Από των Ελληνιστικών μέχρι και των Πρωτοχριστιανικών χρόνων*, Athens: University Press, pp. 59-60.
2. See also Karabatzaki-Perdiki, Helen, 1988, *Ο Ποσειδώνιος και η Αρχαία Στοά, Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Στωϊκής φιλοσοφίας*, Ioannina: University Press, pp. 1-2.
3. See Philo, *De septen. et fest. dieb.* p. 284 Vol. II Mang. (SVF 3, 330), Dio Chrysost., *or.* III § 43 (Vol. I p. 41, 7 Arn.) (SVF 3, 331), Clemens Al., *Strom.* II p. 420 Pott. (SVF 3, 332).
4. See also Karabatzaki-Perdiki, Helen, 1988, *Ο Ποσειδώνιος και η Αρχαία Στοά, Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Στωϊκής φιλοσοφίας*, Ioannina: University Press, pp. 333-335.
5. See Aurelius Marcus, *Meditations* IV 4, 1-6, V 16, 1-12, VII 55, 1-14, IX 23, 1-6.
6. See Cicero, *De Legibus* I 10, 28 (SVF 3, 343), *De Officiis* I 12, *De Finibus* III 65 (SVF 3, 342).
7. See Aurelius Marcus, *Meditations* XI 8, 1.1-12.
8. For a more detailed analysis of these subjects see Dragona-Monachou, M., 1992, "Justice and law in Stoic philosophy", *Diotima* 20: 37-42, Mitsis, Phillip, 1997, "Οι Στωϊκοί και τα δικαιώματα", *Δευκαλίων* 15/1: 173-192 and Schofield, M., 1993, "Two Stoic approaches to justice", in A Laks and M. Schofield (eds) (1995), *Justice and generosity. Studies in Hellenistic social and political Philosophy*, pp. 191-212, [Symposium Hellenisticum, 6th, Cambridge, 17 and 18 August 1993], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, IX-304p, and in K. Boudouris (ed.) (1993), *Hellenistic philosophy*, Vol. I, pp. 169-188, Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture.
9. See also Karabatzaki-Perdiki, Helen, 1988, *Ο Ποσειδώνιος και η Αρχαία Στοά, Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Στωϊκής φιλοσοφίας*, Ioannina: University Press, pp. 334, notel.
10. See Dio Chrysost., *Or.* XXXVI § 23 (Vol. II p. 7, 7 Arn.) (SVF 3, 334), Cicero, *De Republica* I 19 (SVF 3, 338), Cicero, *De Legibus* I 7, 22 (SVF 3, 339), I 16, 44 (SVF 3, 311, 312), Cicero, *De Finibus* III 21, 71 (SVF 3, 309).
11. See Philo, *De Joseph.* Vol. II Mang. p. 46. (SVF 3, 323).
12. See Stobaeus, *Anthologium* IV 27, 23.1-60.
13. See Lactant., *Instit. div.* III 25. (SVF 3, 254), Clemens Al., *Strom.* IV 8 p. 590. (SVF 3, 254).
14. See Philo, *De septen. et fest. dieb.* p. 283 Vol. II Mang. (SVF 3, 352).
15. For a further analysis of the social-political ideas of the Stoics see Aalders, G.J., 1975, *Political Thought in Hellenistic Times*. Amsterdam: Hakkert., Anton John, P., 1996, "Η Ηθική και Πολιτική Φιλοσοφία των Στωϊκών", in K. Boudouris (ed.) (1996), *Η Ηθική Φιλοσοφία των Ελλήνων*, pp. 167-178. Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, Baldry, H.C., 1959, "Zeno's Ideal State", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 79: 3-15, Boudouris, Konstantine, 1993, *Wisdom, philosophy and politics*, in K. Boudouris (ed.) *Hellenistic philosophy*, Vol. I, Athens: International Center for Greek Philosophy and Culture, pp. 32-41, Clark, Stephen R.L, 1987, "The city of the wise", *Apeiron* 20: 63-80, Erskine, A., 1990, *The Hellenistic Stoa. Political thought and action*. London: Gerald Duckworth and Co., Karabatzaki-Perdiki, Helen, 1998, *Ο Ποσειδώνιος και η Αρχαία Στοά, Συμβολή στη μελέτη της Στωϊκής φιλοσοφίας*. Ioannina: University Press, Xenakis, J., 1969, *Epictetus, philosopher-therapist*. The Hague, Reesor, M.E.,

1951, *The Political Theory of the Old and Middle Stoa*. New York: Augustin, Schofield, M., 1991, *The Stoic idea of the city*. New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Stanton, G.R., 1968, "The cosmopolitan Ideas of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius", *Phronesis* 13: 183-95 and Edelstein, L., 1966, *The Meaning of Stoicism*. Cambridge: Mass.