Classical Stoicism and the Birth of a Global Ethics: Cosmopolitan Duties in a World of Local Loyalties

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Do I have responsibilities to strangers and, if so, why? Is a global ethics possible in the absence of supra-national institutions? The responses of the classical Stoics to these questions directly influenced modern conceptions of global citizenship and contemporary understandings of our duties to others. This paper explores the Stoic rationale for a cosmopolitan ethic that makes significant moral demands on its practitioners. It also uniquely addresses the objection that a global ethics is impractical in the absence of supra-national institutions and law.

What do we owe to strangers and why? Is a global ethics possible in the face of national boundaries? What should we do when bad governments order us to mistreat strangers or the weak? These were just some of the questions to which the ancient Stoics applied themselves. Their answers, which emphasised the equal worth and inherent dignity of every human being, were to reverberate throughout the Western political tradition and directly influence modern conceptions of global citizenship. Yet, how the Stoics arrived at their cosmopolitanism is often imperfectly understood, hence the first part of the discussion. Objections that their ideas were too utopian to be practically useful also reflect misunderstandings about Stoicism, hence the second part of the paper.

I begin by exploring the Stoic rationale for the *cosmopolis,* the world state, after which I address the objection that a global ethics is impractical in the absence of supra-national institutions and law. Well aware that local loyalties and the jealousy of sovereign states towards their own jurisdictional authority would represent significant obstacles to the practice of a global ethic, the Stoics insisted that the *cosmopolis* could still be brought into existence by those who unilaterally obeyed the laws of 'reason' even within the confines of national borders and in the face of hostile local institutions.

Background

Inspired by the teaching of Socrates and Diogenes of Sinope (Diogenes the Cynic), Stoicism was founded at Athens by Zeno of Citium in around 300 BCE and was influential throughout the Greco-Roman world until around 200 CE.[1] Its teachings were transmitted to later generations largely through the surviving Latin writings of Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus, C. Musonius Rufus and Marcus Aurelius, as well as the Greek author Diogenes Laertius via his *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. The Stoics not only influenced later generations; they were extremely influential in their own time. From the outset, Stoicism was a distinctive voice in intellectual life, from the Early Stoa in the fourth and third centuries BCE, the Middle Stoa in the second and first centuries BCE, to Late Stoicism in the first and second centuries CE (and beyond) when Stoicism, having spread to Rome and captivated many important public figures, was at the height of its influence.

Stoic Cosmopolitanism and Global Ethics

The idea that we should condition ourselves to regard everyone as being of equal value and concern is at the heart of Stoic cosmopolitanism. The Stoics were not alone in promoting this ideal: the Cynics were also cosmopolitan. But it was the Stoics – the dominant and most influential of the Hellenistic schools – who systematised and popularised the concept of the oikoumene, or world state, the human world as a single, integrated city of natural siblings. Impartiality, universalism and egalitarianism were at the heart of this idea.

The Stoic challenge to particularism was extremely subversive for a time when racism, classism, sexism and the systematic mistreatment of non-citizens was a matter of course. It was hardly thought controversial, for example, that Aristotle (1943: IV. 775a. 5-15) should declare that 'in human beings the male is much better in its nature than the female' and that 'we should look upon the female state as being … a deformity'. Similarly, ethnic prejudice was the norm rather than the exception in antiquity. The complacent xenophobia and racism of Demosthenes's 341 BCE diatribe against Philip of

Macedon would not have raised a single eyebrow in his Greek audience:

> [H]e is not only no Greek, nor related to the Greeks, but not even a barbarian from any place that can be named with honour, but a pestilent knave from Macedonia, whence it was never yet possible to buy a decent slave (Demosthenes, 1926: 31).

Reversing these kinds of attitudes (and the behaviour attendant on them) was the self-appointed task of the Stoic philosophers.

The Cosmopolitan Ideal, Social Distance and Care for Strangers

The first step towards promoting a universalistic ethic entailed changing our whole way of thinking about social distance. The Stoics were well aware that most people tend to imagine their primary, secondary and tertiary duties to others as ranked geographically: distance regulates the intensity of obligation and people will normally give priority to themselves, intimates, conspecifics, and compatriots (in roughly that order), before strangers, foreigners and members of out-groups. This view is what is commonly referred to as 'the common-sense priority thesis' or the 'common-sense' view of global concerns. Hierocles, the second century Stoic philosopher, introduces the image of concentric circles to illustrate how we generally conceive of our obligations to others:

> Each one of us is … entirely encompassed by many circles, some smaller, others larger, the latter enclosing the former on the basis of their different and unequal dispositions relative to each other. The first and closest circle is the one which a person has drawn as though around a centre, his own mind. This circle encloses the body and anything taken for the sake of the body … Next, the second one further removed from the centre but enclosing the first circle; this contains parents, siblings, wife, and children. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The next circle includes the other relatives, and this is followed by the circle of local residents, then the circle of fellow-tribesmen, next that of fellow citizens, and then in the same way the circle of people from neighboring towns, and the circle of fellow-countrymen. The outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race (fragment reproduced in Long and Sedley 1987: 1349).

But the Stoics wanted to radically change this way of thinking and feeling about others. As Hierocles suggests, we must first become aware of our own prejudices in order to repudiate them and thereafter substitute them with superior cosmopolitan mental habits:

> Once all these [circles] have been surveyed, it is the task of a well tempered man, in his proper treatment of each group, to draw the circles together somehow toward the centre, and to keep zealously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed ones (Hierocles fragment in Long and Sedley 1987: 1/349).

Humanity must embark on a morally demanding developmental journey that begins (quite naturally) with a variable quality of attachment towards others, proceeding to a state of invariable quality of attachment towards the world at large. The Stoics did not aim to invert the priority thesis (which would mean that the intensity of our feelings would increase the further out we went); rather, they strove for a *sameness* of feeling for all, regardless of social distance. Impartiality was their ideal. To be self-regarding and partial to intimates was not only contrary to natural law; it was a sign of moral immaturity.

Why Do I Owe Strangers (and the Less Fortunate) Anything?

What led the Stoics to this ambitious mission? The answer originates in Stoic theology, which was devised as a philosophy of defence in a troubled world and a rival to the religion of the Olympian pantheon. The Stoic emotional ideal was a combination of spiritual calm (*ataraxia*) and resignation (*apatheia*) that were to be cultivated in order to achieve happiness/human flourishing (*eudaimonia)*. The point of religion was to bring order and tranquillity; something the official Greek religion of the Olympian gods was quite obviously incapable of achieving. This religion, with its capricious, sex-crazed, ill-tempered and unpredictable gods who meddled in human affairs from the heights of Mount Olympus hardly inspired calm, let alone compassion. Neither did its unending demands for propitiation and sacrifice promote resignation. So the Stoics devised a less disconcerting religion that spoke of an orderly universe with no divine intervention whatsoever and brought the gods not only closer to us, but *into* us; no longer distant, terrifying others but, quite literally, kindly insiders. 'Reason', the 'mind-fire spirit' existed as intelligent matter, residing benignly in all life and impelling it unconsciously and teleologically towards order and rightness. Humans are not separate from God (or Gods) but a part of 'Him': 'the universe [is] one living being, having one substance and one soul' (Marcus Aurelius 1916: IV.40).

Because the Gods have given each human a particle of God-like intellect ('reason'), we have a natural kinship both with God and with each other (Marcus Aurelius 1916: 12.26). As related parts of the same entity, and

equally sharing in 'reason', we are natural equals on earth with equal sagacious potential. According to Cicero, everyone has the spark of reason and 'there is no difference in kind between man and man [it] is certainly common to us all' (Cicero 1988: I. 30). Seneca says that the light of educated reason 'shines for all' regardless of social location, which is, after all, merely a matter of luck and social conditioning. As he quite sensibly points out, 'Socrates was no aristocrat. Cleanthes worked at a well and served as a hired man watering a garden. Philosophy did not find Plato already a nobleman; it made him one' (Seneca 2002: Ep. 44.3). Exclusive pedigrees 'do not make the nobleman'; only 'the soul … renders us noble' (Seneca 2002: Ep. 44.5). Everyone has the same capacity for wisdom and virtue and everyone is equally desirous of these things (Seneca 2002: Ep. 44.6).

True freedom comes from knowledge, from learning to distinguish 'between good and bad things' (Seneca 2002: Ep. 44.6). Being knowledgeable and therefore 'good' is not just for 'professional philosophers'. People do not need to 'wrap [themselves] up in a worn cloak … nor grow long hair nor deviate from the ordinary practices of the average man' in order to enter the cosmopolis; rather, admission is open to anyone who insists on using their own right judgement, in simply 'thinking out what is man's duty and meditating upon it' (Musonius 1905: Discourse 16). This is the route to both the moral and the happy life: when we learn to live according to the natural law of Zeus, and therefore our natural tendencies, we are enabled to achieve inner tranquillity (Chrysippus in Diogenes 1958: 'Zeno', VII. 88).[2]

Duties, Harm and Aid

The Stoics insisted that one of the things that allow us to live virtuously in accordance with nature is the correct performance of duties (Sorabji 1993: 134-157). The virtuous agent is beneficent and just: justice is the cardinal social virtue ('the crowning glory of the virtues') and beneficence is closely 'akin' to it (Chrysippus cited in Cicero 1990: I. 20). We should always strive to refrain from harming others since the universal law forbids it (Cicero 1990: 1. 149.153; Marcus Aurelius 1916: 9.1; Seneca 2002: Ep. 95.51-3). Indeed, 'according to [Nature's] ruling, it is more wretched to commit than to suffer injury' (Seneca 2002: Ep. 95.52-3).

But the negative virtue of refraining from harm is not enough: virtue must also be positive. It is natural for human beings to aid others (Cicero 1961: III. 62). We are duty-bound to meet the needs of our divine siblings (Marcus Aurelius 1916: 11.4) and it is 'Nature's will that we enter into a general interchange of acts of kindness, by giving and receiving' (Cicero 1990: I. 20). The morally mature person knows that she must 'live for [her] neighbour' as she lives for herself (Seneca 2002: Ep. 48.3).

We have duties of justice, fairness and mutual aid to one another and the needs of others imply a duty to meet them: 'Through [Nature's] orders, let our hands be ready for all that needs to be helped' (Seneca 2002: Ep. 95.52-3). Moral failure is epitomised by an 'incapacity to extend help' (Epictetus 1989: Fragment 7, 4: 447). It is not only neutral strangers who are entitled to our assistance, but also our supposed enemies. Contrary to the 'common notion' that 'the despicable man is recognised by his inability to harm his enemies … actually he is much more easily recognised by his inability to help them' (Musonius 1905: Fragment XLI). Clearly, the moral demands of the cosmopolitan ethic are extremely high, requiring that we treat impartially even the feared and hated. The need for a high level of moral maturity is one of the reasons why the Stoics placed so much emphasis on the desirability of emotional self-control.

Universal Versus Positive, Local Law

The extirpation of passionate attachment and the moderation of intense loyalties to conspecifics are basic preconditions for a global ethics. Impartiality is the key to Stoic egalitarianism: the wise person knows that the laws governing her behaviour are the same for everyone regardless of ethnicity, class, blood ties (Clark 1987: 65, 70), and gender (Hill 2001). Judgements about the welfare of others are always unbiased: 'persons' are of equal value and ends in themselves regardless of their social location or proximity to us. Reason is common and so too is law; hence 'the whole race of mankind' are 'fellow-members of the world state' (Marcus Aurelius 1916: 4.4; see also Epictetus 1989: I.9. 1-3; Cicero 1988: I.23-31).

Cicero (1961: III.63) says that 'the mere fact' of our 'common humanity' not only inclines us, but also '*requires*' that we feel 'akin' to one another. The siblinghood of all rational creatures overrides any local or emotional attachments because the 'wise man' knows that 'every place is his country' (Seneca 1970: II, IX.7; see also Epictetus 1989: IV, 155-165). In order to 'guar[d]' our own welfare we will subject ourselves to God's laws, 'not the laws of Masurius and Cassius'. When family members rule over others we 'demolis[h] the whole structure of civil society' while putting compatriots before 'foreigners' destroys 'the universal brotherhood of mankind'. If we refuse to recognise that foreigners have the same 'rights'[3] as compatriots we utterly destroy all 'kindness, generosity, goodness and justice' (Cicero 1990: 3. 27-8).

The rational agent will put the laws of Zeus before those of 'men' whenever a conflict between them arises, even when this imperils the wellbeing of the agent concerned, as it so often did in the case of Stoic disciples. For example, when in 60 CE Nero sent Rubellius into exile to Asia Minor, Musonius went with him in a gesture of solidarity, thereby casting suspicion on himself in the

eyes of the lethally dangerous Nero. Upon the death of Rubellius, Musonius returned to Rome, where his Stoic proselytising drew the further ire of Nero who subsequently banished him to the remote island of Gyaros. After Nero's reign ended, Musonius returned to Rome but was banished yet again by Vespasian on account of his political activism.

Musonius thus practised what he preached. He taught that it is virtuous to exercise nonviolent disobedience in cases where an authority orders us to violate the universal law. It is right to disobey an unlawful command from any superior, be it father, magistrate, or master because our allegiance – first and always – is to Zeus and to 'his' commandment to do right. In fact, an act is only disobedient when one has refused 'to carry out good and honourable and useful orders' (Musonius 1905: Discourse 16). Where the laws of God conflict with the laws of 'men', natural law trumps positive law (Cicero 1988: II.11). As Epictetus (1989: 3.4-7) says: 'if the good is something different from the noble and the just, then father and brother and country and all relationships simply disappear'. All the Stoics agree on this point and they directly influenced Kant's views on the same subject, namely, that the universal law 'condemns any violation that, should it be general, would undermine human fellowship' (Nussbaum 2000: 12).

Realist Objections

It is often suggested that cosmopolitanism in general – and the idea of the world state in particular – is hard to take seriously because it is practically impossible due to the persistence of sovereign states and the localised loyalties that accompany them. On this view, Stoic cosmopolitanism necessarily involves the commitment to a world state capable of enacting and enforcing Stoic principles. However, the *cosmopolis* is not, strictly speaking, a legal or constitutional entity (although, of course, it can be): rather, it is, first and foremost, an imaginary city, a state of mind, open to anyone capable of recognising the inherent sanctity of others and who evinces the Stoic virtues of *sympatheia* (social solidarity), *philanthropia* or *humanitas* (benevolence), and *clementia* (compassion). We become cosmopolites when we work hard to look beyond surface appearances (Seneca 2002: Ep. 44.6) and live in obedience to the laws of reason and of nature, rather than the variable laws of a single locality. These are the qualities that secure a person's membership of the *cosmopolis* and which also conjure it into reality.

We are all capable of being cosmopolites. As Musonius says, the mind is 'free from all compulsion' and is 'in its own power'; no one can 'prevent you from using it nor from thinking … nor from liking the good' nor from 'choosing' the latter, for 'in the very act of doing this', you become a cosmopolite (1905: Discourse 16). Sovereign states and the citizens within them do not need formal, supranational structures and legal frameworks to operate as world citizens; they only need to begin acting *as though* the world were a single city which, although composed predominantly of strangers, is nevertheless and inescapably one family of natural siblings. Everyone can and should be a cosmopolite, even if this means challenging the institutional authority of those who rule.

The fact that the *cosmopolis* is an imagined community (albeit constituted by real moral agents committing real acts of 'reason') does not mean that its laws are not more secure once they have been enshrined in positive law. In fact, the Stoics preferred to see the laws of Zeus codified (Bauman 2000: 70, 80). The Roman Stoics, in particular, sought to bring the *cosmopolis* into practical existence through the exercise of power. This is why many threw themselves into the *Sturm und Drang* of politics. The true sage spurns the life of solitary contemplation to devote him/herself to civic life. There is a fundamental human desire to 'safeguard and protect' our fellow human beings and because it is natural to 'desire to benefit as many people as [one] can' (Cicero 1961: III.65); it follows that 'the Wise Man' will 'engage in politics and government' (Cicero 1961: III.68; Diogenes 1958: 'Zeno' VII. 21). Many Stoics sought to influence politics either directly or indirectly. The Stoic philosopher-king, Marcus Aurelius, was the most powerful person on earth during his reign (Noyen 1955), while the Gracchi brothers pushed for many Stoic-inspired reforms such as admission of all Italians to citizenship. Those without formal power sought to influence those who did hold it: Panaetius advised Scipio Aemilianus, Seneca advised Nero while Blossius of Cumae advised Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus (see Hill 2005).

But in the absence of formal institutionalisation the laws of the *cosmos* are still held to be real; we remain bound by them because, as Cicero points out, 'true law' is not 'any enactment of peoples' [statute] but something eternal which rules the whole universe by its wisdom in command and prohibition'. After all, 'there was no written law against rape at Rome in the reign of Lucius Tarquinius' yet 'we cannot say on that account that Sextus Tarquinius did not break that eternal Law by violating Lucretia'. The eternal law 'urging men to right conduct and diverting them from wrongdoing ... did not first become Law when it was written down, but when it first came into existence', which occurred 'simultaneously with the divine mind' (1988: II. 11).

Even if they never managed to constitutionally entrench the cosmopolis, the Stoics believe it is realised the moment an agent internalises its moral precepts and begins to act upon them unilaterally. On this view, technically, the world state can be brought into existence by the actions of a single right-thinking person. Therefore it is unclear that a global ethics is meaningless without a world state and without political anchoring practices, and positive laws to guarantee them. At its inception, the

Stoic *cosmopolis* was conceived as a moral mindset: no Stoic ever advocated a legally constituted world-state. One enters the *cosmopolis* in and with one's mind, a mind that is disciplined to absolute impartiality, capable of seeing past social conventions and intent on universally extending benevolence and compassion.

Concluding Remarks

For the Stoics, we are siblings with a common ancestry who share equally in a capacity for reason. Accordingly, we are all entitled to full recognition. The global state, the *cosmopolis*, is brought into being by this recognition: it is a function of the capacity to be impartial and to appreciate that there is an inescapable duty to aid anyone in need, regardless of their social location or social proximity. The Stoics knew that this was a hard task requiring not only a high degree of emotional control and moral maturity but also a willingness to resist social convention and local practice. Their injunctions to reasonable behaviour were made in full knowledge of the fact that the desired anchoring practices would most likely be absent; nevertheless, they expected their disciples to adhere to them, not only in the absence of such practices but even in the face of *hostile* anchoring practices, whether in the form of laws or norms.

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End Notes

1. Although the school wasn't officially closed until 529 CE.
2. Happiness is synonymous with wisdom and virtue in Stoicism.
3. Habendam, or what is held or is due to one.

Every Breath

It's interesting to consider that
every breath I take
has already been breathed
been part of another breath.
Perhaps that dog over there,
smelly and hairy, licking its own arse.

Lynne White,
Gwynedd, Wales