

STOICISM.

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A READING of the Stoic writers for the first time inevitably suggests certain comparisons and contrasts with the Greek philosophy from a study of which the subject has been approached. The student is likely first of all to be impressed with the fact that Stoicism presents a more comprehensive outlook on life than did the philosophical schools which preceded it. Here for the first time is to be found a firmly welded unity with a fourfold aspect of science, religion, philosophy and ethics. Philosophy is no longer the reduction of the concrete to the abstract with entire emphasis on humanism, as we found it in Plato, or a comprehensive system of interweaving and nicely related scientific departments of knowledge, as in Aristotle, but an outlook on the universe in four directions, with a new and stern atmosphere of grim fate and renunciation hanging over it all. This is not, however, to say that each of these aspects is equally vital. The scientific and philosophical sides of Stoicism, based entirely on the science and philosophy of the past by a cunning rearrangement and combination of elements from Democritus, Plato and Aristotle, seem singularly barren when compared with the living doctrines of the sources. The sound, firm materialism of Democritus has become a curious kind of spiritual mechanism. The world of reality, to be sure, is to the Stoics corporeal; force and matter, the active and the passive, mind and body, are correlative and inseparable, distinguishable from one another in degree and not in kind. But it is to the first of these pairs that the actual enthusiasm of the Stoic goes out; he conceives force and soul as material, but he insists on treating them as if they were spiritual. Soul gets carried over into a religious sphere in a way that utterly distinguishes it from mere passive matter. Nor in absorbing Aristotle do they get the full inspiring force of his teleology. They follow him, it is true, in making the universe teleological, but they give the idea a

mystical color and merge it into an adoration of God or the gods, giving it a religious, or at least ultra-scientific aspect which Aristotle would not have accepted.

Not only the science of the Stoics but their metaphysics has a religious color. The idea of the *logos*, or immanent reason by which the universe is governed, which has fitted everything together, good and evil, into one perfect whole, regulating itself with eternal fitness and adequacy,—this *logos* is no cold philosophical principle, but a religious fact which enlists the emotional attitude of the Stoic. As an indispensable and vital part of one majestic whole, he acquires a supreme dignity and worth; he is a part of God. Similarly the thought that every individual soul is a manifestation of a great world-soul, to be eventually absorbed into it again, has a religious meaning for the Stoic; he feels himself, as Epictetus says, a son of God, as all men on earth are sons of God. Although the scientific and philosophical principles of Stoicism furnish its fundamental basis—indeed the one ultimate fact on which the whole spirit of the ethics rests is that the world is governed by irreversible laws and in accordance with reason—science and philosophy become vital to the Stoic only when they are transmuted into religion. It is the religious side of Stoicism which captures the enthusiasm and fires the soul. This attitude is, of course, different from the Greeks'; they kept their religion separate. Christianity, on the other hand, had no scientific content at all. Stoicism is thus a sort of half-way stage between Greek philosophical-scientific thought and Christian religious-ethical thought. It drags along with it the Greek science and philosophy, but the vitality is slowly leaving both. At the same time it has its face towards the future of Christian thought and ethics and goes to meet it with joyful steps. Stoicism is at once the senility of Greek thought and the infancy of Christian faith.

If the religious predominates in Stoicism at the expense of the philosophical and scientific, we may expect the ethical element in it to show also a flourishing vitality. And of course this is the case. In fact so predominant is this ethical aspect of Stoicism that it almost in fact and quite completely in tradition obscures even the religious. Yet they are bound up inseparably together. There can be ethics without religion, but can there be such an ethics without religion? I cannot conceive of such an ethics as that of Stoicism being practiced by human beings except warmed and vitalized by that emotional attitude towards the universe which we call religion.

The ethics of Stoicism is an ethics of conformity to nature. Although God is benevolent and all-wise, his plans and reason are

not to be pettily used for the individual's advantage. The responsibility for the happiness, well-being, and integrity of soul of the individual are strictly upon himself. It behooves him, therefore, to recognize both his powers and his limitations. Opinion, pursuit, desire and aversion are within a man's power; in these spheres he is absolutely free. Body, property, reputation are not; he is, from the nature of things, helpless before them. If a man desires or enjoys only those things that are in his power, he can never be unhappy; for he can never be deprived of them. If he ceases to desire or fear or shun those things which are not in his power, he can be nothing but happy, for he will never suffer disappointment. Freedom is not requiring things to happen as you wish, but wishing them to happen as they do. Knowledge is knowledge of the will of God and obedience to it. The virtuous man cannot be affected by poverty, pain, bereavement, misfortune, insults, pleasures, or any evil, for he has no feelings of either desire or aversion for these things. He is independent because he wishes nothing that depends on others. He is happy because he is acting in accordance with the Universal Reason. He knows that nothing can happen which is not conformable to the order of the universe. He knows that "what e'er betide, he is the Captain of his Soul."

A reading of the Stoic writers, Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius gives one a sort of composite picture of the ethics through the medium of three contrasting temperaments. Epictetus has the true philosophical spirit, a poise, a placidness, a grave irony, that rings true. Even if one knew nothing about his history, one could say, "Here is a philosophy that has been lived, that has worked with one man at least; whose words and practice have been identical, and are still vital with sincerity." If one allows himself at times a little appreciation of the ingenuity with which he works out his ethical ideas, this does not destroy in one the profound sense of the power and force of such a philosophy for men in all ages and climes, situated as was Epictetus, or a realization of the happiness which he achieved. Epictetus is a living philosophy, a gospel incarnate, a missionary of a way of life for men.

Seneca, while delightful in style and form, has a curious attitude of detachment from his writings. Stoicism to him is a good philosophy, he is earnestly trying to follow it, he understands it and expounds it luminously; but it is not precisely his way of life. Not only his ideas but his treatment of them are strikingly like the ethics of modern Christianity. I have heard many a sermon which followed word for word his discourse on "Providence." Where

Epictetus pictures Stoicism in all its sternness, even though it be a tonic sternness, a fortifying and ennobling strength,—Seneca dwells rather on the compensatory and comforting aspects. Trial and pain are not simply matters of utter indifference; they are tests of valor, means perhaps to an end. The virtuous life is happy, not so much on account of the attainment of the desired apathy, but because virtue has some sort of positive quality about it. If the rigid outlines of Stoicism sometimes get softened down in Seneca to a suggestion of the utilitarian, he has yet succeeded in making the Stoical ethics attractive in a greater measure than either of the other writers.

Far different is the gloom which pervades the “Meditations” of Marcus Aurelius. The ancient world, which had begun to decline in the days of Epictetus, to which decline Stoicism may be said to have been a philosophical reaction,—this world had become sunk in almost irretrievable decay. Had Marcus Aurelius been slave instead of emperor, Stoicism might have enriched and vitalized his life, as it did that of Epictetus. It is a philosophy which puts heart and meaning into misery and oppressive environment. But to Marcus Aurelius at the head of the world, lacking nothing of material wealth, honor and fortune, it only revealed the hopeless futility of life. He saw that society was utterly decayed; he did not have misfortune and evil conditions to contend against, or a struggle with environment into which he could, like Epictetus, pour wholeheartedly his spiritual energy. His Stoicism revealed nothing to him except that overpowering sense of the vanity of life which hangs like a pall of horror over his writings. I have seen Christians of to-day of the Tolstoyan type who feel keenly the social misery around them, who struggle to remedy it, fail and in despair see nothing that they can do except to mellow their spirits and trust in the ultimate divine justice. This, I imagine, was Marcus Aurelius’s cast of mind. Stoicism helped him to endure, but it shed no ray of light into the gloom; it rather intensified the darkness. Every thoughtful man gets at some period or other of his life a sense of the futility of living; but it is the sustained feeling and constant impression of having run into a *cul-de-sac* that makes Marcus Aurelius such appalling reading. It is a far cry from the richness of Epictetus to the sterility of Marcus Aurelius.

The contrast between the three men in religious tone is equally striking. Epictetus has the grave, responsible feeling of partnership, a sturdy working together with God; Seneca shows that rather complacent attitude which characterizes many of our modern theo-

logians, a sort of good, amicable understanding with the universe; Marcus Aurelius's cry is that of the wounded Job,—“Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him!”

This markedly religious element in Stoicism furnishes, I think, the clue for its relation to Christianity. That there is such an indissoluble relation between them is of course almost a platitude. But the similarities between Stoicism and Christianity which appear to the theologian as curious coincidences are really evidences that Christianity found in Stoicism the fruitful soil from which alone it could spring and bloom. I do not see how Christianity could have converted any but a Stoic world. Instead of coming as a fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets, it can be said rather to have come as a fulfilment of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. It filled out the religious content of Stoicism, which bade fair to wither in the barren soil of Pantheism; it revitalized its virtues and added hope to its rugged strength. It made the God of benevolence and Immanent Reason, a divine Father, who cared for each one of his children; it made the vague hope of immortality a triumphant certainty; it made suffering and submission to the will of God, the basis of Eternal Life; it made the tranquil peace of the virtuous man over into the saintliness of the redeemed; it made of the conviction that a man was a part of the universe, the overpowering sense of communion with Christ; it made over the Stoic's contempt of the world and its pleasures into a complete and triumphant other-worldliness, in which the Unseen was the only Reality; and, finally, it added belief, the fierce clinging of the soul to a dogma, the spiritual and intellectual sense of being planted on a rock, that Stoicism had so sadly lacked. Christianity transfigured Stoicism, poetized it, completed the spiritualization of it, and with it swept the western world. Christianity was in a sense an easier religion than Stoicism. The latter was quite too hard for the mass of men; only the sage and philosophic few could attain virtue under it. Christianized, however, it became possible for every one, and with the cunning progress of the church, it became irresistible. The way in which the church adapted Christianity to the people, adding touches here, filling up niches there, warping and molding it until every part of the soul of man was soothed and satisfied, must in detailed study, I think, form one of the most fascinating fields of research. Little as the result of this process, the mediæval church, resembles the Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius, the body and blood of it was that very Stoicism. Christianity was the vital breath that was breathed into its dying body and with it conquered the world. Else I do not see how the phenomenon can

be explained. Surely nothing sounds more incredible than that a religion of other-worldliness, of asceticism and sacrifice, with the cross, that sign of the lowest dishonor as its symbol, should overcome the decaying, despairing, vicious Roman world. Yet exactly that happened. Only when we realize that the noblest spirits of the time felt a soul-sickness in the irretrievable degeneration going on about them, that their hearts ached for rest, for satisfaction, for some world of reality away from this frightful chaos, that while Stoicism offered them a partial respite and consolation, it lacked definiteness, hope and sensuousness, and that Christianity supplied all these,—only when we realize this can we understand how it was possible for the cross to triumph. The world was sick for redemption; Stoicism could solace but it could not redeem.

This Stoic element Christianity has borne along within her fabric down through the centuries. In times of crisis or critical change, when dogmas lose their grip and the supernatural becomes misty before our eyes, the bare, rugged outlines of Stoicism stand out in our midst. Much of the ethical preaching of to-day is pure Stoicism. Resignation to our lot; realization of our responsibility and dignity in the sight of God; the imperative of duty as measured by our relations to others; governance of the spirit, and struggle against besetting sins; the vanity of life and a need for a decent preparedness for death; realization that suffering and misfortune are indispensable means to goodness, and that all is finally safe in God's hands,—all this is Stoic. It may be said that all this is Christian too; but in Christianity it is incidental to a more glorious, transcendental fact, while in Stoicism it is the very root and branch.

If it was into Christianity that Stoicism led, it was out of Greek ethics that it came. The time between the death of Aristotle and the height of the Stoic school is a time of slow decay in Greece. The ethics of Plato and Aristotle were formulated in a society in which there were potentialities for the realization of their ideals. But with the passing glory of Greece, with increasing political chaos and decline of material prosperity, with insecurity of fortune and social instability, any realization of the Greek ideal, that is, the harmonious development of the tendencies and powers of the individual through the medium of a well-ordered state, became absolutely impossible. Men turned to an ethical philosophy that had at least some potentiality of realization in it. Epicureanism was a sort of last stand of the Greek spirit, but with Lucretius it comes to be hardly differentiated from Stoicism in actual ethical tone. The latter with its

message of solace for a defeated world completely replaced the old ethics. It is pathetic to think of an ethics of intelligent cultivation of the finest spiritual and material resources of the world, their rational, scientific utilization and mastery, in a world of social virtue and cooperation and mutuality,—of such an ethics being superseded by an intensely narrow, individualistic, renunciatory system such as Stoicism. It seems like a sort of spiritual suicide that the thought of the time committed. It was certainly an amputation, a mutilation, and all for the sake of a negative thing like tranquillity! And yet the goal of Greek ethics, although its emphasis was on the dynamic, was also a satisfying happiness. It was the positive aspect of the same thing that the Stoic labored, though so negatively, to acquire. The difference, however, was as wide as the poles. For the Greek moved in harmony with the vital forces of Nature, but the Stoic cut across her grain at every point. Yet our topsy-turvy notions ascribe a higher nobility to Stoicism than to the Greek ethics! On the assumption, doubtless, that the more hopeless and corrupt and unspiritual the age, the more beautiful and pure and noble will be their ethical philosophy, while an age of beauty and happiness and knowledge and power and spiritual values of the highest import must perforce possess a sordid, mean and material ethics? If we say we feel instinctively that the Christian-Stoical ethics is nobler than the Greek ideal, it is because we have lived so long and so submissively in an ugly, deformed world of social misery and maladjustment that we have lost our sense of true ethical values. The only world worth living in,—it cannot be too often reiterated,—is a Greek world, or a world which people with you are trying to make Greek; and this fact should be the basis of all our teaching, our preaching, our talking, our writing and our working.

It will be said that this is all very well, but that even the best of Greek worlds will deal the individual, at some time or other, terrific blows of misfortune. For the individual, and at such times, Stoicism is surely legitimate and indeed indispensable. Every man is a Stoic at some crisis of his life. There is a fierce satisfaction in feeling that whatever may happen, one's own soul cannot be shattered; that a man has something which no power in heaven and earth can deprive him of; that with it he can face fearlessly the whole universe, and no real harm can happen to him. The Stoical doctrine, however, sounds better than it works. The Stoical spirit at its best can be but a temporary thing. It is a splendid thing to be kept on hand for emergencies. But as a way

of life it falls pitifully short of the Greek ideal. It is in its last analysis but a way of making the best of a bad bargain; it is a "sour-grapes" philosophy, and however much we may admire the wisdom and submissiveness of the renunciator, we must admit that there is something still better and that is to have gotten the grapes themselves. I may accede to poverty (since I must), but I will not insult the integrity of my soul by saying that it is right. The Stoic would. Or rather perhaps he would remove the whole question to the apathetic plane, and say that he is entirely indifferent to both poverty and well-doing, and can say nothing about the rightness and wrongness at all. I do not charge the Stoic, as do some, with subscribing to fatalism, or of investing himself with spiritual pride. But I do accuse him of evading the question that Greek ethics puts with such beautiful clearness, "What is the happiness of man, constituted as he is?" and I accuse him of being a foe to progress. The Greek ideal is dynamic; it pushes men forward to a definite goal which in the best moments of the race they have clearly seen to be the desirable one. But Stoicism is purely static and passive; the Stoic endures, he does not pioneer. To the Greek mind, man in the mechanism of the world is the tender, the guider of the machine; to the Stoic, he is the helpless product, or at best an infinitesimal cog or screw. The Greek ideal may be delusion, and the Stoic the divinely ordained road to the skies. If so, is it not strange that all that is finest in mankind has called imperatively, insistently through all the ages for the realization of the former ideal? Only when the crushing force of environment has sapped his hope, only when the odds of fate seem hopeless against him, only in defeat does man turn to Stoicism. Here he may find strength sufficient for the day, but not renewed vigor for the battle. Stoicism in its last analysis is an ethics of weakness and decline and deficit, and not of strength and constructive power.