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How would a Stoic govern society?

By Paul Lanagan

The goal, project, and object of Stoic philosophy are thus to allow the philosopher to orient himself or herself within the uncertainties of daily life, by proposing probable choices which our reason can accept, even if it is not always sure it ought to.

Pierre Hadot, "The Inner Citadel"

Introduction

The ancient Stoics did not commit themselves to any particular political doctrine, but they believed that the wise man would involve himself in public affairs, guided as always by his faculty of reason.ⁱ It is often said that politics is the art of compromise, because there will always be opposing views on every proposed action. How then would a Stoic take a position on issues of importance to the public and how would they deal with those who opposed them? The objective of this paper is to investigate an aspect of applied ethics as it applies to the world of political systems.

An ideal world as envisaged by Zeno in his "Republic", would be populated by sages. Sages have unshakeable certainty in their knowledge of the world and the decisions they make. There would be no need for nations as everyone would be a citizen of the cosmos. However, for our purposes we must accept the world as it is, populated by imperfect individuals and divided into separate countries, or societies. This essay will situate the Stoic leader in a modern, Western democratic society and ask: how should it be governed?

Relevant Principles of Stoic ethics

Stoic Ethics

The term "Ethics" derives from the Greek word *ethos* relating to characterⁱⁱ, and Stoic ethics focusses how the individual should develop their character to achieve happiness and a "smooth flow of life"ⁱⁱⁱ. The ancient Stoics saw ethics as one of the three important and interrelated topics in their philosophy, the others being logic and physics. Ethics is concerned with actions in the world; specifically those relating to other people. Its associated primary virtue is justice, and its characteristic attitude in Stoicism is concern for others.^{iv} Justice is classically subdivided into piety, honesty, equity, and fair dealing.^v These principles would guide the Stoic in governing the country.

Appropriation

The concept of Appropriation, or Oikeiōsis, in Stoicism is that human beings begin life by seeking only self-gratification, but as their faculty of reason develops they identify with other members of their family and eventually to fellow citizens of their country and then all human beings, who share our faculty of reason. This is why Stoics consider themselves as citizens of the world. As Marcus Aurelius put it:

“If the mind is common to us all, then so is reason that enables us to understand and tells us how to treat one another. If this is so, then we hold the law in common as well. We are fellow citizens, subject to one unwritten constitution, and the world is, as it were, a city.”^{vi}

It follows that the Stoic must always feel themselves part of a larger society and not as an isolated individual. It also follows that the government of the country must treat other countries with respect, while recognising that their actions are not up to us.

Good, bad and indifferent

Preferred indifferents are those things that are not up to us but which are in accordance with nature. Dispreferred indifferents are those things not up to us and which are not in accordance with nature. The actions of other people are of course not up to us, so they are therefore indifferent: either preferred or not preferred depending on whether we consider them to be in accordance with nature or otherwise. For a Stoic the only value attached to an indifferent is in the decision whether to pursue it or avoid it and how one goes about obtaining it or not.

When we have settled on a course of action that we are convinced is in accordance with nature, and we are opposed by other people, those people become dispreferred indifferents to us. As Marcus Aurelius puts it in Book 5, Chapter 20 of his meditations:

“Other members of the human race are my nearest relations in this respect only – I am obligated to do them good and to be patient with them. But if they prevent me from doing what I know is right, then they become as distant and indifferent to me as the sun, the wind, or a wild beast.”

In considering how a society is to be governed, the Stoic will be considering how the wealth of a society is to be used in the best way. Wealth is a “preferred indifferent” and a Stoic should do everything in their power to secure preferred indifferents for themselves and others, energetically and, most importantly, in the right way.

The evolution of societies and the nature of a democracy

The Greek historian Polybius (c. 200 – c. 118 BC) developed a theory of cyclical evolution of the systems of government in a nation, starting with monarchy and passing through various stages before returning to monarchy once more. See Appendix 1 for an illustration of the Polybian cycle, which is also known as Anacyclosis.

According to the theory of Anacyclosis the transition from one form of government to another will occur as follows. First in order is monarchy, when a chieftain or general will emerge from chaos to take control of a group of people by force. Eventually a wise and popular leader will attain the leadership

and become king, obtaining authority not only from force, but the loyalty of the people. This is the second stage of evolution. Hereditary succession will occur until successors abuse their authority for their own gain, resulting in the third stage: tyranny. Eventually the leading people in the country will grow weary of the tyrant and depose them, resulting in the ascendancy of the aristocracy in the fourth stage. This is the start of rule by a few. Sometime later the descendants of the aristocrats will begin to abuse their power and value prestige.

When many people begin to resent the ruling elite, power will pass to an oligarchy, the fifth stage. The growing educated and affluent middle class among the people will then begin to take power into their own hands, in the sixth stage which is democracy. Eventually wealth of the people begins to be concentrated into fewer hands and the number of people in the middle class is reduced. Political animosity grows. People in the state will develop a sense of entitlement and reliance on welfare from the state. Reduction of the middle class polarises the society and the people rally to popular leaders or demagogues. When the people unite against the rich, democracy becomes ochlocracy in the seventh and final stage. Chaos ensues and demagogues will arise and seize power, returning the government to the first stage: monarchy, completing the cycle.

Between the end of stage seven and the return to stage one, civilisation will collapse. Polybius suggested that the three forms of benign government: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, are unstable and that these types of society will tend to degenerate to the more stable forms of “malignant” government: tyranny, oligarchy and ochlocracy.

It has been argued that we can observe the complete cycle of Anacyclosis in the Roman empire and that Anacyclosis has almost run a complete cycle in the modern English-speaking world, with the transition from democracy to ochlocracy already underway.^{vii} Stoics living in a democracy would therefore be driven to resist the transition to ochlocracy by preserving the features of a democracy that are in accordance with nature.

Governing principles

What then are these characteristics of a democracy? In the society we are considering, all citizens are equal before the law and have equal access to the legislative process. Every vote has equal weight and there are no unreasonable restrictions applied to a citizen who seeks to become a representative. The freedom of all citizens is secured by rights which are usually protected by a constitution. There should be absolute equality of the sexes and moral equality of all people regardless of their economic circumstances.

We can now deduce some broad principles that the Stoic would use to govern their country. Firstly, that decisions should be made with the good of society in mind, according to the principle of appropriation. Next, that opposition should be met firmly, with reasoned arguments. Opponents should be given a hearing, treated justly, and their views considered, but they must not be allowed to prevent the right course of action once this has been determined through reasoned debate. Assuming Polybius was correct, the establishment of a democracy will rely on a stable and large middle class, and will not survive without it. Therefore, a prosperous middle class must be maintained to prevent the rise of demagogues and the destruction of democracy. The rise of Ochlocracy will involve the tyranny of the majority over minorities, so the rights of all citizens must be guaranteed by the constitution of the country. As well, the rights of minorities should not be allowed to overrule the bulk

of the citizenry in acts of so-called “positive discrimination”. The “identity politics” of race, gender and religion must not be allowed to fracture society into competing groups. Finally, it is necessary to prevent the triumph of passion over reason in order to preserve democracy. How these principles should be applied to specific areas of government will now be considered.

Stoic ethics applied to governance of a democracy

Education

To maintain a strong democracy, it is necessary to have a knowledgeable and engaged citizenry. Therefore, taxpayer-funded education must be available to all citizens of the country to allow them to complete their education to the extent of their abilities. Students should be required to study the history of their country and of western civilisation in general throughout their schooling.

In primary school students should be given moral precepts to memorise. The great Stoic teacher Musonius Rufus advocated teaching children in a way that leads to wisdom, including knowledge of good and bad, true and false, virtuous and vicious. This will involve instilling a sense of shame towards things that are bad, and to familiarise the child with situations that call for courage. Musonius argued that the result of his techniques would be forming a habit in the child of doing just actions^{viii}. To avoid the bad and seek the good will prepare the child to be good citizen, and ready them for the next stage of their studies.

In high school, all students should be introduced to Greco-Roman moral philosophy, including Scepticism, Epicureanism and Stoicism. The aim here is to train the youth in virtue, or what Musonius called “nobility of character”.^{ix} Understanding of philosophy will allow the youth to understand why good things are good and bad things are bad and why the good is to be valued. Another aim is to further develop habits that form good character and to practice what they learn. The nature of government should also be included, and the Polybian cycle should be part of the curriculum. University education should be available to those who are able to undertake it, however, taxpayer funding should be carefully allocated to those courses that benefit society. Courses that do not directly contribute to the benefit of society should be funded by those who wish to complete them.

Welfare

Welfare should be available to all those who cannot work. It should be sufficient for them to survive but should not be used to accumulate luxuries. As Seneca pointed out, there are some things that injure those that receive them, and we should consider the usefulness of our gift rather than the wish of the person to receive it.^x Those who are able to work should be given assistance to return to work because this will help them to retain their self-respect. Meanwhile they should be employed on work to benefit the community, such as gardening or maintenance of public spaces. The long term unemployed should be provided with some cash assistance, but mainly with coupons that can be used for food, clothing and other necessities. This is in accordance with Seneca’s principle.

Health

The government of the country should provide universal taxpayer-funded health services to all citizens to the extent possible without going into deficit. No citizen should be permitted to sicken and die for lack of access to adequate health care.

Culture and multiculturalism

Migrants from different cultures should be welcomed to the country, but they must agree to learn the native language before they can become citizens. Otherwise, they would remain apart from fellow citizens. Migrants must agree to conform to the host culture and adopt local cultural practices where there is any conflict with their own. Migrants should be notified that if they commit crimes they will be deported to maintain harmony in the country. They should be informed that if they become citizens and then commit serious crimes resulting in prison terms their citizenship would be cancelled and they would be deported. These requirements should be made clear to them when they apply to immigrate to the country.

Any attempt to secure special rights for minorities among the citizens would be denied, based on the principle that all people have equal rights under the law. There would be no “quotas” or affirmative action based on race, ethnicity or gender.

Defence

The government is required to maintain adequate defence capabilities. The Stoic principle of appropriation means the country must not participate in any wars of aggression against foreign nations. All use of armed forces must be strictly for the defence of the country or its allies. Defence cooperation with non-democratic countries would be avoided.

Conclusion

As the quote by Pierre Hadot at the introduction to this essay implies, there is no definite answer to the question “what would a Stoic do” in any given situation. Instead, as Hadot wrote, the philosophy will suggest “*probable choices which our reason can accept, even if it is not always sure it ought to.*” Stoics will have varying political views, across the spectrum from left to right. However, if the individual is living in a contemporary liberal democracy, this essay has argued that certain approaches are implied, based on Stoic ethical principles.

Firstly, the Stoic would resist the Polybian movement from the benign, democratic form of government to ochlocracy or “mob rule”. The tendencies of the population to rely on welfare and develop a sense of entitlement would need to be countered. Attacks on the middle class would be resisted. Also, a high standard of public education would be made available to all citizens, with early emphasis on teaching moral precepts, followed in later years by the study of the philosophical reasoning behind them. Welfare should be available to those who cannot work, but others who are unemployed should contribute to society through public works while they are preparing to re-enter the workforce. A basic universal health scheme should be provided for all citizens. Migrants should be expected to assimilate to the culture of the country and support its democratic values. The country should maintain the capability to defend itself and assist its democratic allies in their defence, but not participate in wars of aggression.

It is fitting to close this essay, as it opened, with a quotation from Pierre Hadot:

What one does matters less than the way in which one does it. In the last analysis, the only true politics is ethics. It consists...essentially in service to the human community, devotion to others, and justice.^{xi}

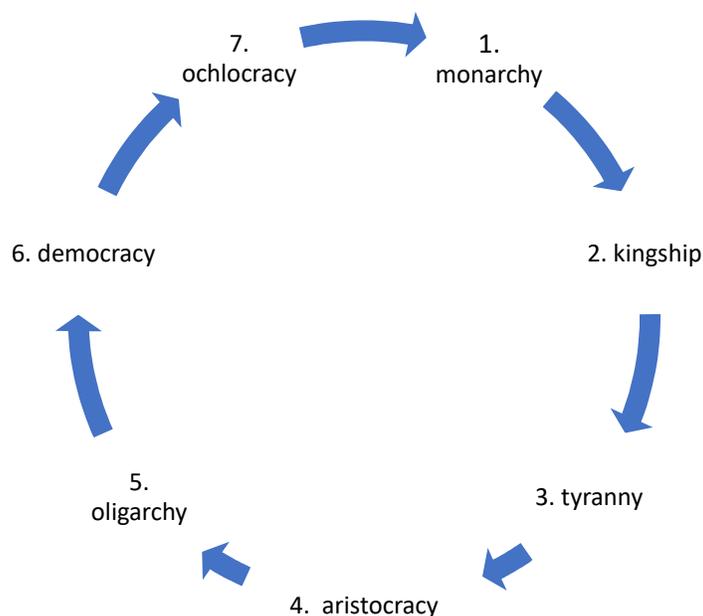
One who governs using Stoic ethical principles would be wise and just but would require self-discipline and courage: virtue in action.

NOTE: *Paul Lanagan has been a member of the faculty of the College of Stoic Philosophers for many years, and was formerly the Dean of Students. This essay was provided as partial fulfillment of the requirement for the third term Ethics course of the Marcus Aurelius School.*

As always, any rebuttal to these ideas should be addressed to:
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Appendix: The Polybian Cycle of Political Evolution (anacyclosis)



Monarchy is rule by a strong man

Kingship is rule by a wise ruler with the interests of the people at heart.

Tyranny is rule by a small group with only their own interests at heart

Aristocracy is rule by a group of enlightened people

Oligarchy is rule by a few, in their own interests

Democracy is rule by the people, with the common interest in mind

Ochlocracy is rule by the majority, brought about by demagogues, when passion triumphs over reason.

More details on the cycle can be found in the Wikipedia article at:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anacyclosis>

Notes and acknowledgments:

- i Clarke, M.L., *The Roman Mind*, (Norton and Company, 1968) argues in Chapter IX of his book that the Roman Stoics had no objection in theory to kingship as a political system, but reserved the right to object when monarchy led to tyranny.
- ii Pigliucci, M., *How to be a Stoic*, (Penguin, 2017), p22
- iii Seddon, K., *Epictetus' Handbook and the Tablet of Cebes*, (Routledge, 2005), p220
- iv Pigliucci, M., op cit, p24.
- v From <http://www.iep.utm.edu/stoiceth/> , accessed 25 July 2017
- vi Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Book 4, chapter 4, translated by Hicks, C.S & D.V, *The Emperor's Handbook - A New Translation of the Meditations*, (Scribner, 2002)
- vii <http://www.anacyclosis.org/page.php> , accessed 23/07/2017
- viii Dillon, J.T., *Musonius Rufus and Education in the Good Life*, (University Press of America, 2004)
- ix Dillon, *ibid*, p46
- x Seneca, *On Benefits*, Book II
- xi Hadot, P., *The Inner Citadel*, (Harvard University Press, 1998), p306