

Stoicism, school of humanity

The International Review has already published several studies on the history of humanitarian ideas. It was necessary to return to the origins and to mark the milestones in successive civilizations in the search for more humanity in the relations between individuals and nations.

The idea of mutual aid, of universal unity, can be found among the ancient philosophers and one can see that some assertions, in ancient Greece for example, did to a certain extent proclaim the ideal of human solidarity which is the motive force of the Red Cross. This is shown by Mr. Voelke who has recently made a comprehensive study of some of the questions which are dealt with here.¹ We wish to thank him for his contribution. (Ed. Note)

“ Let me be gentle towards my friends and terrible for my enemies ; respected by the former and by the latter feared ! ”

This is not the prayer of a man dominated by an inflexible urge for power, but of a sage whose moderation all are agreed to praise, the poet and legislator Solon, to whom the Athens of the VIth Century B.C. owed a remarkable political constitution.

Two centuries later, the greatest philosopher in ancient times, Plato, is indignant over Greeks killing each other in civil wars, although at the same time he supports the natural character of wars between Greeks and barbarians : in his eyes there was nothing reprehensible in conflicts between different races.²

¹ See *Les rapports avec autrui dans la philosophie grecque, d'Aristote à Panétius*, Paris, Vrin, 1961.

² *Republic*, V, 470 c.

Can more be said to make one feel how much, in primitive times or even in the full flowering of the classical period, the Greek spirit was little inclined to accept the idea of a human community transcending differences between individuals as well as the opposition between races and social classes ?

The chief merit of the Stoics was above all to have conceived such an idea, to have given it a philosophical basis, to have submitted it continuously for the consideration of writers, statesmen and jurists of the Hellenistic and Roman period.

In his *Republic*, a youthful work which for a long time caused scandal, the founder of the school of Stoics, Zeno of Citium, painted a picture of humanity as one community, similar to a herd of animals living in a single field. Like a God, Love ruled over this ideal society which knew no division between State, class or race. This utopia seemed to take over certain theories already developed in the IVth Century B.C. by the Cynics who rejected the idea of the State and political and social institutions, and of whom the most famous, Diogenes of Sinope, called himself a *citizen of the Universe*.

But very soon and already with Zeno, then with his immediate successors, Cleanthes and Chrysippus (IIIrd Century B.C.), Stoicism gives an original form to these ideas, elaborating them in a doctrine which is nearly completely its own work.

Close observation of nature shows that every animal has a self-love which is given to it with life itself. This self-love extends to all which is *its own*, *oikeios* (from which is derived the untranslatable term *oikeiōsis*, signifying the fundamental fact of this appropriation of the living person to himself). Thus, with an animal, love of self will also embrace the offspring, regarded as forming part of its own being : it lives in its own young.

Now, with man, the presence of reason leads to a decided extension of this love of self. Reason or *logos* is in fact in the eyes of the Stoics the very essence of man : common to all men it really constitutes their own being. Instead of loving himself in himself and in his children, man will therefore love himself in all other men, whose being is fundamentally similar to his own, on account of their possessing this same reason. Thus the self-love which is

natural in all animals is changed in man into love of the whole human race.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Stoic Hierocles attempted to make this difficult doctrine understood by showing that each human being is to a certain extent the centre of a series of ever larger concentric circles ; starting from the centre there is first of all the circle of close relatives, then successively those of distant relatives, fellow countrymen, and so forth until the outermost circle is reached which embraces all humanity. The development of self-love among humans results in drawing all these circles to coincide with the centre.

The Stoics thus lay a natural foundation for the human community by grafting the love of others on to the profoundest of all human instincts, and they have overcome the conflict which exists between egoism and altruism by assimilating the feelings one has for others in relation with oneself.

The philosophical basis of this community is something more than a mere human community : it is in short a cosmic community. In fact reason or *logos* present in all men, which involves them in essential kinship, is not the exclusive characteristic of human beings. It is the omnipresent principle which makes of the universe an orderly and harmonious whole, the divine law which regulates all human activity and the course of nature. The Stoic thus everywhere finds the principle which constitutes the essence of his nature : wherever he is in the presence of someone else as in the universe, he has the feeling of being in his own country :

“ It is unimportant where one lives as the whole world is one’s own city.”¹

These philosophical views had decisive moral and social consequences. In particular they implied that all human beings favoured equal dignity and that barriers separating individuals and peoples were suppressed.

Contrary to ideas generally held in classical Greece, the Stoics maintained that there was no difference between Greek and barbarian. This, without naming him, was aimed at Aristotle who still upheld the traditional theme of the pre-eminence of the Hellenic race, and the geographer Eratosthenes as a good pupil

¹ Marcus Aurelius, X, 15.

of the Stoics praises Alexander for having regarded Greeks and barbarians as equals.¹ And later, when the Stoic Marcus Aurelius exercised imperial power, national boundaries to him were to extend far beyond the limits of the Empire: "My city and my country, as far as I am Antoninus, is Rome; but so far as I am a man, it is the world. Thus the interests of these cities are for me my only possessions."²

The same point of view was expressed as regards slavery: in the eyes of Zeno's disciples, the traditional distinction between free men and slaves does not correspond with any natural distinction between human beings, as Aristotle thought. The legal position of the slave therefore does not imply any natural inferiority: as a man, the slave has the right to the same respect as the citizen. This principle inspired some of the finest pages of Seneca, the Latin philosopher: "Are these slaves? No, they are men.—Slaves? No, they share our dwelling.—Slaves? No, they are friends of a lower order.—Are they indeed slaves? No, they are companions in slavery, if you consider that fate has the same power over them as over us! ..." In Seneca's eyes, only destiny makes a man a slave. His inferior condition is not therefore accompanied by inferiority in character, and if this condition can impose a servile stamp on the slave's personality, that stigma will disappear on contact with honourable people. The master accordingly has real duties towards his slave; he will for example be obliged to make him rediscover his dignity by welcoming him into his family and even at his own table.³

Far more miserable than Seneca's slaves were those whom the Stoic Posidonius, ethnologist as well as philosopher, described suffering in the Spanish mines towards the year 100 B.C. whose pitiable condition he describes, combining a scholar's interest with the sympathy of a man touched by the misery of his own kind:

"The slaves employed in the mines bring unbelievable wealth to their masters, but they exhaust themselves by digging night and

¹ Strabo, I, 4, 9.—This allusion to Alexander shows that his political conceptions already foreshadow those of the Stoics. Indeed his refusal to accept the political divisions which classical Greece considered to be natural, his attempt to found an Empire of profoundly different people, have often caused him to be regarded as a forerunner of Zeno.

² VI, 44.

³ *To Lucilius*, 47.

day in the underground galleries and die in large numbers, victims of excessively bad treatment. In fact they know no respite or pause in their work, and the surveyors force them to support this terrible condition with blows until they miserably expire. Some of them have sufficiently robust bodies or have sufficient resistance of spirit to last out, but they only prolong their torments, for the extent of their misery makes them prefer death to life.”¹

In Stoical philosophy the ideas of liberty and slavery take on a different meaning. Instead of laying emphasis on social distinctions, they have a moral implication : the real slave is the insensate one who revolts against the divine law resenting its power as a yoke : whilst the man who is really free is the wise man who submits his will to that law. The difference between the slave and the free man is thus the same as that existing between the insensate and the wise. But this difference places the unity of the human race in peril : there is in fact such a deep gulf between the wise man and the insensate that the former risks finding himself cut off from the rest of humanity and isolated by his very superiority.

This rigid position of principle, however, gradually becomes more and more flexible and, whilst upholding the merits of such a distinction, the Stoics elaborated an “ average ” theory of morality whose chief purpose it was to regulate social relationships within the existing human groups, in which one only met the insensate. Such a theory of a very practical character forced man to show, according to circumstances, the deep sociability inherent in his nature.

With Antipater of Tarsus (IIInd Century B.C.), moral practice in particular consists of a deep and subtle analysis of the marriage union and the duties of married couples. This is perhaps the first time that a Greek philosopher regards marriage as a specific form of human relationship yielding to none other in its dignity.

This appreciation of the marriage union implies that woman has ceased to be considered inferior, as was the case in classical Greece. If Antipater himself still seems to be hesitant about admitting that woman should be fully equal to man, the Latin Stoics, such as Musonius and Seneca, clearly maintain that the female character can reach the same moral perfection as that of man and thereby possesses the same dignity :

¹ Text by Diodorus of Sicily, V, 38.

“ You forget, you will say to me, that it is a woman whom you wish to console : you only give me men as examples.—But who will then dare say that nature has less generously endowed women and that it has restricted the range of their virtues ? They have, you must believe me, as much strength as men ; they find, when they wish to do so, the same moral resources ... ”¹

Married couples have not only duties towards each other : they also have duties towards their own children : “ From the moment that one has a child one is no longer free not to love it and not to look after it ”.² A remarkable statement when one recalls that the ancient laws allowed a child which one did not wish to keep to be exposed to the elements !

The Stoics maintain that one has not only duties towards one's family or friends, but also towards the City or the State. Consequently, the ordinary citizen, just as the magistrate or the monarch, will never lose sight of the good of the community and will be filled with the idea that their interest cannot be dissociated from that of the collectivity.

The Stoic will therefore not scheme to obtain public office out of ambition, but will accept to perform its functions with the conviction that Providence has selected him to watch over the common good. Thus Antigonus Gonatas, King of Macedonia, draws inspiration from the precepts of his master Zeno of Citium by considering his royal office as a “ servitude full of glory ”.³ Later Marcus Aurelius was to carry out without complaint an onerous task for which his profound nature scarcely seemed to destine him. Since he considered that Providence had entrusted him with the conduct of the Empire, he undertook it without flinching, sacrificing for this burden the philosopher's studious retreat :

“ As you yourself are destined to perfect the social system, so let each of your actions contribute towards perfecting the life of society. Every action of yours which does not lead, either directly or from afar, to the end set by the community, is an element of discord breaking the unity of your life, a sedition similar to that of a person who, in a public assembly, stands apart from the general agreement.”⁴

¹ Seneca, *Consolation to Marcia*, XVI, I.

² Epictetus, *Discourses*, I, 23.

³ Aelian, *Hist. var.*, II, 20.

⁴ IX, 23.

However, it should never be forgotten that an essential relationship exists between all men. We owe duties not only to members of a limited social group but to all men, whatever they may be. These duties are not derived from temporary legal provisions but are imposed on us by universal reason, the divine *logos* in which we all have part. Since this is included in human nature, this reason defines the law to which each must conform :

“ The Law rules over all things, over matters divine and human ; it should be the sovereign authority determining good and evil, the leader and guide of beings whom Nature has destined to live in community together, the rule assessing justice and injustice, since it is the power which ordains what has to be done and forbids all which ought not to be done ”.¹

This solemn declaration to be found at the beginning of Chrysippus' book on the *Law*, and which many other Stoics have developed or paraphrased, constitutes the clearest assertion of a natural law transcending the provisions of positive law which vary according to countries and periods. One knows that the Imperial Roman juriconsults were largely inspired by this concept.

Even war does not completely disrupt the human community, nor does it check this natural law. Adapting a treatise of the Greek Stoic Panaetius (IIInd Century B.C.) to the Latin, Cicero declares : “ There is a limit to revenge and punishment ”. From this principle is derived an idea of war whose inspiration from the Stoics cannot be doubted. War is an extreme measure which can only be taken unless the settlement of disputes by negotiation has failed. Its sole end should be to ensure a just peace, and once victory has been won, the vanquished should be spared, in so far as they have not shown proof of inhuman acts. Against this background, the civic virtues of mercy and humanity are nobler than those of war.²

Such are some of the dominant assertions of the social and political philosophy of the Stoics. In spite of the newness of their views and the generosity of their thought, these philosophers are not, however, revolutionaries, they are even traditionalists. They, in fact, accept reality such as it exists, since in their eyes the immanence of the divine law makes of the world an order in which

¹ Marcianus, *Instit.*, I.

² *De Officiis*, I, 11, 33-35 ; 25, 88.

the greatest possible perfection has already been achieved. The community of which they maintain the existence is part of this order of things, and rather than achieve this perfection they seek to show its presence and beauty to those who are still not aware of it. To help their fellow men to be imbued with this sight is the chief service which they try to render them.

One has often thought to have found in Stoicism the Christian ideal of brotherhood and love. Many of its writings indeed tempt one to do so. According to Epictetus, for example, the existence in all men of the same reason, a principle which is at the same time cosmic and divine, makes of them "citizens of the world" as well as "sons of God".¹ This common origin implies real brotherhood to them; in his slaves a master should see "brothers of nature"¹.

We should, however, guard against considering the Stoic as a humanitarian who does not know himself. In spite of all the compromises which his practical morality accepts, he tends to regard men who do not follow his precepts as fools, whom he should no doubt assist, but whom he castigates remorselessly. If Marcus Aurelius makes one of his rules that of finding in all circumstances reasons enabling excuses to be made for other people's failings, this bias towards gentleness is in contrast with the attitude adopted by his school. In principle the Stoic must reject pity and forgiveness, and the sentiment of moral superiority, the conviction that someone who is unfortunate is necessarily a madman who does not know how to conform to the universal order instituted by Providence, prevents him from showing real charity towards others. Enlightened pedagogue who punishes scholars, rather than a good Samaritan binding up the wounds of someone in distress, he does not see a *fellow-being* in others.

If the Stoic, however, is not the precursor of the gospel of love, he at least teaches respect for the human personality and shows the way to an awareness of equality and universality. By so doing he has left a deep mark, from the legal, political and moral point of view, on human thought.

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¹ *Discourses*, I, 9.