

## Stoics – Theory of Knowledge

Zeno of Citium (ca. 300 BCE) is recognized as the founder of Stoicism.

The term “stoic” derives from the Greek word stoa, meaning painted porch. It is believed that Zeno gave lectures on the stoa of a public building in Athens.

See Picture.

- Zeno is said to have been influenced by a variety of philosophers and philosophical traditions including
- Socrates, especially by his teaching that virtue is the highest good.
- Crates the Cynic, especially his idea that humanity is a universal community (cosmopolis) of which we are all citizens.

The Cynics emulated the simplicity of Socrates' life. They were noted for their rigorous honesty and their critical temperament.

- Stilpo the Megarian, who formulated some strict rules for logical inferences that go beyond those discussed by Aristotle.
- Heraclitus, especially his idea that the cosmos is sustained by a universal fire containing the logos.

Zeno's teachings were developed to an elaborate degree by Cleanthes of Assos (331 – 232 BCE).

Epicureanism and Stoicism were both widely popular but Stoicism eventually surpassed Epicureanism, especially in Roman times.

Chrysippus of Soli (280 – 206 BCE) is known as the second founder of Stoicism. Probably, he developed the ideas of the old Stoics as well as adding some new ideas of his own. None of his writings have survived.

Like the Epicureans, the Stoics divided philosophy into three parts: Logic, Physics and Ethics.

**Logic** - is compared to a fence surrounding a field, with Physics being like the soil in the field, Ethics being like the crop that grows in the field. The point of having the field surrounded by a fence is to keep out pests (erroneous beliefs) intent on devouring the crop (corrupting influences).

Logic is concerned with explaining the methods one must use in order to achieve the highest degree of certainty in our knowledge.

Like Plato and Socrates, they thought that the most important thing in life is the care of the soul and that the only way to put the soul into an excellent condition (called virtue) is to attain solid knowledge of oneself and one's relation to everything else.

Like the Epicureans, the Stoics were *empiricists*. They maintained that all knowledge begins with experience. A particular sort of sense experience they called apprehensive (cataleptic) impressions serves as the foundations of all other knowledge.

Unlike vague or ambiguous experiences, apprehensive impressions are experiences to which the soul spontaneously assents by *grasping* or apprehending them. In doing so, the soul also grasps the objects from which the impressions derive. These impressions serve as the *criteria* of what does or does not exist.

These impressions are the source of our general concepts. These are concepts that have not been attained through teaching or by the constructive work of the imagination.

These impressions have a peculiar mark that distinguishes them from all others. Unfortunately, it is not possible to convey in words what this mark is. One knows it when one encounters it.

It is vital to the good of the soul that human beings have the greatest means there is of communicating with one another : Language - a system of audible and visible *signs* of the thoughts that occur in our souls.

There are various languages spoken by different peoples. It is the fact that these different words express the same thoughts that makes it possible to translate one language into another.

Concepts are the meanings of general terms, noun phrases, verb phrases, etc.

Mental propositions are the meanings of complete sentences. Unlike words and sentences, concepts and propositions are not physical entities.

Interestingly, the Stoics said that everything that exists is physical. The consequence, obviously, is that concepts and propositions do not exist. But this result did not bother them. They simply explained that some things exist and other things do not exist. It is possible to think of both sorts of things. What would Parmenides say to this statement?

Chrysippus' investigation of the various types of propositions was remarkable rich. It added ideas not explored by Aristotle and anticipated developments in Logic that would not be made by others for 2000 years.

## **Physics**

The Stoics' model of the (current) universe has a sphere of matter in an infinite void.

The outer layer of matter is made of a feiry substance called *aether*.

This layer contains the stars, which consist of consist of concentrated portions of aether.

Inside the other layer is a layer of air, then a layer of water and finally a ball of Earth. Eventually, the aether will draw all water into itself. Everything will begin to burn and then, eventually, there will be nothing left but the feiry aether . Eventually, the aether will generate various elements from itself. From these, it will form another world, also doomed to exactly the same ending. And so on, endlessly.

The feiry aether is like a seed containing the reasons (*logoi spermatakoï*) of all things. The series of births and deaths of universes has no beginning and no end. Each universe is exactly like the preceding universe. Each person has lived and will live again infinitely many times.

Various amounts of aether mixed with air are the cohesive and organizing forces binding together the inert elements of earth and water according to eternal laws. The logos in the aether is also the governing force in nature. It appears as the powers of growth, sensation and thought in various types of creatures.

A wise human soul is the purest earthly manifestation of the divine aether.

Only matter exists. Its permanent form is aether. It contains divine intelligence and the seed-reasons of all things. It is by these that the aether modifies and transforms itself in all ways.

Each soul is a tiny portion of the aether. It is determined by a comprehensive plan of the logos – Destiny or Fate. Everything happens according to strict necessity.

But, Chrysippus says, Fate is actually compatible with human beings having free will.

He explains that an event is not entirely to outside factors. Much of what happens to a thing depends on its internal properties. The causes that are outside us are called antecedant causes. But there are also factors within us, such as individual initiative or spontaneous assent to an impression, which contribute to the courses our lives take.

However, the stoics did not make the spontaneous actions of the soul exempt from the plan of Fate. To some extent, we can foretell what Fate has in store for us because all things are really connected and we can discover some of these connections.

It is because of this idea that the Stoics were keenly interested in occult arts such as Astrology, Augury, prophecy and in interpreting dreams and visions.

Someone named Berossos from Chaldea (present day Iraq) is said to have introduced the Greeks to Astrology in the third century BCE.

Its popularity in both Greek and Roman civilization is because of its near-perfect fit with Stoic cosmology.

The stoics agreed with Socrates. And Plato's criticisms of the crudely anthropomorphic Homeric religion. To improve on this, they favored an allegorical interpretation of the traditional myths about the gods. These accounts should not be taken as literal truth. They should be taken figuratively. Stories about gods are symbolically true, they represent real things like the Sun, the planets, the seasons, etc. Allegorical interpretation is not a distortion because the things represented by the symbols are manifestations of a real divinity.

Evil is entirely due to human wickedness. It results from people trying to resist their Fate, thus deviating from God's will. In contrast to this idea, Chrysippus said that the existence of both good and evil are necessary in the general scheme of things. Contraries cannot exist without one another.