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The Stoic Tradition

When we think about ancient philosophy we tend to think first and foremost of Plato and Aristotle, the two great Athenian philosophers, whose works have come down to us and that we can read today. In both cases the survival of their texts has been intertwined with commentary traditions, which could only come about because the texts were available but which also contributed to their survival for subsequent generations. The Neoplatonic practice of writing commentaries on the works of both Plato and Aristotle in late antiquity was central, laying the foundations for the subsequent philosophical traditions in Greek, Arabic, and Latin during the Middle Ages.¹

The Stoics had no equivalent commentary tradition. The late Neoplatonist Simplicius wrote a commentary on the *Handbook* of Epictetus, but this co-opted Epictetus into the Neoplatonic curriculum rather than treating him on his own terms as a Stoic.² Earlier, in the first century BC, the Stoic Athenodorus wrote a commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, but this was a case of a Stoic contributing to the burgeoning Aristotelian commentary tradition, not starting a Stoic one.³ Earlier still, Cleanthes in the third century BC wrote a commentary on Heraclitus, but again this was something quite different.⁴ No one set about to write commentaries on, say, the works of Chrysippus in the way that they did on Plato or Aristotle. We cannot know the reasons why;⁵ all we do know is that as a result of this textual neglect more or less all of Chrysippus' works are now lost, save for a few papyrus scraps recovered from Herculaneum. None of this bodes well for the idea of a Stoic tradition.

The early Byzantine and Arabic philosophical traditions were primarily shaped by the ancient Greek Neoplatonic commentary tradition; neither gained any significant familiarity with Stoicism. In the Latin tradition things were quite different. First and foremost readers had access to the philosophical works of Cicero, who remains now, as he was then, one of the most important sources for Hellenistic Stoicism. We know that some of these works featured prominently in the Carolingian Renaissance and were available in numerous centres across Europe.⁶ But for many it was Seneca who came to embody Stoicism as a philosophy. His practical moral advice was often taken to be compatible – or at least not in direct conflict – with Christian teaching, and

1 For a substantial overview of the ancient commentary tradition see Sorabji 1990 and Sorabji 2016.

2 The text is edited in Hadot 1996.

3 On Stoic commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, see Griffin 2015, 129–173.

4 See DL 7. 174.

5 I speculated about this in Sellars 2006/2014, 25–30.

6 See Reynolds 1983, 112–135.

this was helped by his supposed correspondence with St Paul and commendations by Church Fathers such as St Jerome. Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance we find thinkers eulogizing Seneca as one of the greatest moral thinkers of antiquity.⁷ The early Humanists read Seneca alongside their beloved Cicero with the consequence that Stoic ethical themes saturate their contributions to moral philosophy.

The impact of Stoicism started to change in the fifteenth century with the recovery of a wide range of Greek philosophical texts, not least Diogenes Laertius, but also Sextus Empiricus, Plutarch, and others. Soon the ethical claims in Seneca and Cicero were increasingly relocated in the wider Stoic philosophical system. This greater familiarity with Stoic theoretical philosophy led some, such as Marsilio Ficino,⁸ to question the extent to which Stoicism might be compatible with Christian teaching. The sixteenth century saw the beginnings of scholarship on the Athenian Stoa, not least in the work of Justus Lipsius,⁹ as well as the recovery and printing of the works of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. By the seventeenth century Stoicism was everywhere.

By this point all the important sources for Stoicism were in circulation and scholarship was beginning to pay closer attention to differences between the early Athenian and later Roman Stoics, as well as the ideas of individual Stoics. A sense of the internal history of the ancient school was beginning to emerge. For those still committed to Christianity of one form or other, the basic incompatibilities between Stoic and Christian metaphysics were now abundantly clear, even if the ethics retained some attraction. For others, shaped by the ideas of the Enlightenment, Stoic materialism was naturally less of a problem, if not a positive virtue.

The narrative of the history of philosophy that dominated during the nineteenth century tended to prioritize Plato and Aristotle over the later ancient philosophical schools. Even so, Stoicism did not go away. The notebooks of Marcus Aurelius were to become a popular bestseller and interest in the practical life guidance that we find in the writings of the Roman Stoics continues today. In 2018 over 8000 people signed up to “live like a Stoic for a week”, while books with titles like *The Daily Stoic* and *How To Be a Stoic* have found large audiences.

The impact of Stoicism on the history of philosophical problems has been no less great but often harder to pinpoint and discern. From at least Plotinus onwards, philosophers have silently responded to and borrowed from the Stoics, meaning that Stoic ideas in logic, metaphysics, and epistemology recur throughout the history of philosophy alongside the more explicit and widely attested impact of Stoic ethics.

7 Note, as just one example, the judgement of Giannozzo Manetti in Manetti 2003, 244–245.

8 See Ficino’s criticisms of Stoic metaphysics in his *Theologia Platonica* 1. 2 and 3. 1.

9 See Lipsius’ *Manuductio ad Stoicam Philosophiam* and *Physiologia Stoicorum*, both first published in 1604.

The task of examining this Stoic tradition is far from complete. The first serious book to try to tell the story was Michel Spanneut's *Permanence du Stoïcisme, De Zénon à Malraux*.¹⁰ To that we can add the collection of studies in *Stoicismus in der europäischen Philosophie, Literatur, Kunst und Politik*, edited by Barbara Neymeyr and others.¹¹ More recently, I edited *The Routledge Handbook of the Stoic Tradition*, the first volume in English to attempt to map the impact of Stoicism.¹² Naturally all these volumes only offer partial coverage, but they at least begin to map the territory. More work needs to be done, and the studies in this special issue make further welcome contributions. They examine topics ranging from late antiquity to the present and derive from a conference held in Budapest in March 2017. I had the great pleasure to attend and to speak at the conference and I am delighted that this special issue records some of the rich and varied papers presented at the event.¹³

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10 Spanneut 1973.

11 Neymeyr – Schmidt – Zimmermann 2008.

12 Sellars 2016. For a longer overview of the reception of Stoicism, with full references, see my introduction, 1–13.

13 I thank the organizers of the conference and the editors of this journal for their invitations, and first and foremost Nikoletta Hendrik.