

The Roman Libertarians: An Ancient Philosophy of Freedom

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Abstract

Almost every idea has an ancient ancestry, and Smith's "invisible hand" is traceable to Roman Stoicism. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Smith refers constantly to Stoic philosophy, which taught that there is a law more fundamental than any government decree. This *logos*, as they called it, directed events toward the restoration of equilibrium. Marcus Aurelius observed that every entity has an assigned place and must be given the freedom to play its part in creating the good of the whole. Smith continued this theme in his argument that individuals make the maximum contribution to the good of society by attending to their own interests.

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I. Introduction

Are libertarian ideas the creation of modern minds, or do they have a long history? Accused of plagiarizing Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard replied that very little of what the Randians claimed as their own creation was actually new. Most of their concepts, he observed, were easily traceable to medieval Scholasticism (Raimondo, 2000). He was right with regard to not only the specific fact but also the more general principle it represents. Every system of thought has an ancient ancestry. "Madmen in authority," Keynes famously observed, "who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back" (quoted in Lippmann, 1943, p.45). The lines may with a few revisions be applied as much to the "academic scribbler" as to "madmen in authority." Even the best minds are, if not "distilling their frenzy," at least borrowing from the ideas of earlier thinkers. Rand herself recognized her debt to Aristotle, and if Jones (2006) is right, she may have owed Immanuel Kant more than she cared to admit.

Adam Smith always recognized a debt to Francois Quesnay, to whom *The Wealth of Nations* (henceforward: WN) would have been dedicated if Quesnay had not died before the book went to the publisher (Heilbroner, 1953). Before the discovery of Smith's Glasgow lectures on jurisprudence, it was in fact believed that the theory worked out in WN could be traced directly to Quesnay (Buchan, 2006). By the time he got to the lectures on jurisprudence, furthermore, Smith had published a book in which he offered his receipt for ideas that had come to him from distant antiquity.

“Look at the plants, sparrows, ants, spiders, bees, all busy with their own tasks, each doing his part towards a coherent world order.” These lines come from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius (1964, p.77). Their place in the history of economic thought is suggested by the fact that, seventeen years before WN, Smith included a long summary of Marcus Aurelius' ideas in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 2002, pp. 339–41; hereafter, TMS) referring at one point to these very lines. The notion of an invisible hand may have been something Smith stumbled across in his study of Marcus Aurelius. If so, libertarian ideals, far from something to which Rand or any other recent thinker can claim a copyright, have a place among the most longstanding elements of Western thought.

II. The Early Stoics

Marcus Aurelius (121–180) was the last and most famous (Hill, 2004) proponent of a philosophy known as Stoicism. Many of this philosophy's themes were pre-Socratic, but it stepped onto the world stage as a separate school late in the fourth century BC in the teaching of a man named Zeno. Zeno's father was a merchant in purple whose business took him as far as Tyre and Sidon in one direction and as far as Athens in the other (Arnold, 1958). Coming as it did from the son of a widely traveled entrepreneur, Zeno's philosophy was free from the anti-commercial and ethnocentric biases of Plato and Aristotle.

Libertarian tendencies are evident in Zeno's orientation and points of emphasis. Plato and Aristotle addressed themselves to the aristocracy and to young men looking forward to positions of authority (Arnold, 1958). They regarded the populace as either a flock to be shepherded or a dangerous crowd to be deceived and enslaved. Zeno, by contrast, spoke to rich and the poor alike. He taught that society should not be divided into classes, for anyone who wanted to

become wise could do so. Aristotle's statement that "from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection and others for rule" (Copleston, 1967, I, i,93) found no echo in the philosophy of Zeno. Men and women, he added, might have different capacities and different roles, but they were equal as free moral agents and equally capable of gaining wisdom; Zeno's utopia was one in which no man could speak of a woman as his property.

Called "Stoics" because of the porch (*stoa*) on which their teacher gave lessons in Athens, Zeno's followers believed that everything from the falling of a leaf to the rise of an empire could be explained in terms of a single underlying principle, the *λόγος* or *logos* (given as "Word" in the Gospel according to John; Aristotle uses it to mean "justice"; it can also be translated as "reason" or "rationality"). At various points in their history the Stoics referred to the *logos* also as "God," "Providence," "Fortune" and "Fate" (Botton, 2000; Copleston, 1963). Brookes grasps the essence of the concept in this passage:

The natural ecosystem is so...remarkably interrelated that even the best-intentioned efforts to regulate this environment...invariably bring about reactions and distortions throughout the system. The ecologist understands that the system itself is constantly bringing about accommodation and balance. While these accommodations are frequently painful and difficult, they are usually better in their long-term result, because nature tends to preserve, protect, and strengthen its own creation (1982, p.127).

The Stoics taught that Nature achieves a balance, tending always toward something better than a forced "solution" could ever be. "Nature," though, meant more than just the physical universe. The human soul is also a part of Nature, social interaction bears witness to the operations of the *logos*, and history is the record of affairs moving repeatedly toward equilibrium. Plutarch told a story about how an apparently infallible scheme for the murder of the ancient hero Timoleon was thwarted at the last moment. Quite without any knowledge of the scheme, a soldier identified one of the prospective assassins as the person who had killed his father and stabbed the man just before the attempt on Timoleon's life was set to begin. Plutarch said this shows

...the strange dexterity of Fortune's operations, the facility with which she makes one event the spring and motion to something wholly different, uniting every scattered accident and loose particular and remote action; so that things that in themselves seem to have no connection or interdependence whatsoever become in her hands, so to say, the end and beginning of each other (2001, vol. I, p.338).

Although unexpected, the event was not inexplicable. It illustrates the way in which the *logos* restores justice and balance.

The best lessons about how one should live come from a study of how this happens. Zeno said that laws should be dictated by Nature rather than convention and that the ideal state should therefore embrace the entire world (Arnold, 1958). The Stoics also looked back to Cleanthes, who taught that ethical standards should arise from the examination of universal processes. Marcus Aurelius put it this way:

...reason speaks no less universally to us all with its 'thou shalt' or 'thou shalt not.' So then there is a world law; which in turn means that we are all fellow-citizens and share a common citizenship, and that the world is a single city (1964, p.65).

From such sentiments arose what later centuries would describe as the doctrine of natural law, the idea that Nature itself, in part though the medium of specifically human nature, imposes certain rules upon us (Budziszewski, 2003). The consequences of human behavior are predictable (*ceteris paribus*) and predictably unpleasant for one who violates the laws of reason. According Hippolytus, Zeno compared the human condition to that of a small dog tied to a large cart (Botton, 2000, p.108): Because the dog must in any case follow, it is well advised to trot along cooperatively rather than be dragged. "There is no noose so tight," Seneca added, "that it will not hurt the animal less if it pulls *with* it than if it fights *against* it."

When the Stoics talked about "living according to Nature," they meant pulling with the forces of the universe rather than fighting against them. Each of the things of which the universe is composed, they said, had its own unique role in the work of the *logos*: "a fig-tree

is that which does a fig-tree's work, a dog is that which does a dog's, a bee a bee's – and a man a man's" (Marcus Aurelius, 1964, p.155). In attending to its own proper function, each of these individuals was making its necessary contribution to the good of the whole and pulling with the cart rather than against it.

The individual, however, was not sufficient unto himself. The Stoics taught that "all, even the smallest of the co-existent parts of the universe, are exactly fitted to one another, and all contribute to compose one immense and connected system" (Smith, 2002, p.340). Each had a part to play, and ethics (in the modern sense of the word) was largely a matter of recognizing that others also had a part. We were born to cooperate, said Marcus Aurelius (1964, p.45), so any attempt "to obstruct each other is against Nature's law"; and again, "How barbarous, to deny men the privilege of pursuing what they imagine to be their proper concerns and interests!" (p.97). The system itself was so perfectly designed that attempts at interference were certain to be counterproductive (Alvey, 2004).

III. The Roman Stoics

In one sense, it may seem inappropriate to use the words of a Roman, Marcus Aurelius, to summarize the position of the early Stoics, all of whom were Greek. In another sense, though, it is perfectly appropriate, because the philosophy found in Rome a popularity that it had never enjoyed in Greece (Arnold, 1958). The Romans might even be said to have had Stoicism in their blood. In *Caesar and Christ*, Will Durant (1944, p. 56) calls the period from 508 to 202 BC "Stoic Rome." The dates are important because the philosophy as such did not appear in the city until Crates of Malos arrived in 159 BC. The principles of Stoicism shaped the life of their republic long before the Romans learned the terms with which to describe them (Robinson, 1937).

Crates arrived at the beginning of a period during which the Roman constitution's provisions for protecting the individual from the power of the state were undermined. Dictators sought to balance the budget by accusing the wealthy and seizing estates. It reached the place, said Plutarch (2001, vol. I, p.634) at which "Even the murderers began to say, that, 'his fine house killed this man, a garden that, a third, his hot baths.'" A man who was using his resources to aid dispossessed friends found his own name on the list of the proscribed and exclaimed, "Woe is me! My Alban farm has informed

against me.” In reaction to this turmoil, Rome’s best minds looked for ideas with which to shore up ancient foundations. The philosophic system of the Stoics appeared on their doorstep at exactly the moment it was most likely to be welcome.

The Roman aristocrats who were attracted to Stoicism liked the idea of a law deeper and more fundamental than anything a Senate could enact or a tyrant could overthrow. In the words of Cicero,

True law is right reason in agreement with nature, world-wide in scope, unchanging, everlasting....We may not oppose or alter that law, we cannot abolish it, we cannot be freed from its obligations by any legislature, and we need not look outside ourselves for an expounder of it. This law does not differ for Rome and for Athens, for the present and for the future;...it is and will be valid for all nations and for all times....He who disobeys it denies himself and his own nature (quoted in Durant, 1944, p.405).

In Cicero’s mind and in the minds of those who applauded him, this was unfortunately less than a declaration of human rights. Patrician families were not as interested in the principles of justice and freedom as in protecting their traditional comforts and prerogatives. Cicero himself, although he spoke of a law that applied always and everywhere, was unstinting in his praise of the *publicani* and their shameless exploitation of conquered lands (Paul-Louis, 1927). Cato, another of Stoicism’s famous voices, spoke about liberty, argued for the superiority of free over servile labor, and owned slaves.

What Romans remembered, though, were Stoic principles, not the distance between precept and practice in the lives of particular Stoics. During the century between the rise of Augustus and the election of Nerva, the motives of those who died for their opposition to imperial tyranny varied between persons; the common denominator was a belief in the doctrines of Stoicism (Arnold, 1958). Virtually all the martyrs showed the philosophy at its best: “the statement that seems the boldest of all, that ‘the wise man is happy even on the rack,’ was many a time verified by the experience of individual Stoics” (p.299). One of the martyrs was playing chess when the centurions came for him. “After my death,” he warned his opponent, “do not boast that you won the game” (p.393).

An interesting interlude came during the rule of Nero, the first five years of whose reign were later described as the best in the history of the imperial government (Durant, 1944). Taxes were reduced and in some cases even abolished, the frontiers were protected, the Black Sea was cleared of pirates, the courts were reformed, the bureaucracy was streamlined, and the treasury was wisely managed. A proposal for the abolition of customs duties, which would have meant free trade throughout the Empire, was placed before the Senate. Rome prospered as it never had before.

These policies were not the result of Nero's personal wisdom (Durant, 1944). They were the work of his adviser Seneca, the most notable of the first century Stoics. When Seneca's influence gave way before the pressures of imperial politics and the young emperor's desire for self-indulgence, disciplined government passed into memory. Only a miser, Nero said, was concerned about what things cost. Corrupted by power, he drove his subjects to despair, the Empire to the verge of ruin, and his generals to rebellion.

The peace that came with Vespasian and Titus proved to be only the calm before the storm (Durant, 1944). During the reign of terror that came with Domitian, the number of informers multiplied, terrified members of the Senate complied with their ruler's demands, and no person of prominence was safe. Even this, however, was peaceful in comparison with the confusion that followed the Emperor's assassination. At last the Roman Army, for the first time in its history, elected a good man to be the Emperor. The year was AD 96, and the new ruler's name was Nerva.

The extent to which Nerva was himself a Stoic may be in doubt. It is certain that he owed his election in large measure to the eloquence of a Stoic philosopher, one Dio of Prusa, who calmed the mutiny that followed the death of Domitian (Arnold, 1958). Both Nerva and his successor Trajan held Dio (known to later generations as Chrysostom, "the golden-mouthed") in high regard and seem to have paid attention to what he said. The new orientation is suggested by Nerva's decision in the case of Julius Atticus, who had inherited an old house, under which he discovered a vast treasure. Knowing that the law gave the state first claim to such discoveries, Atticus reported it to the Emperor, who refused to take any part of it. Remembering the treacheries and confiscations of Domitian, Atticus cautiously said that he had no idea how to use so much money.

“Abuse it, then,” Nerva replied, “for it is your own” (Gibbon 1977, vol. I, p.40).

Applied to public policy, such attitudes ushered in the longest lasting and most widespread prosperity the world had ever seen. Adam Smith’s friend Edward Gibbon offered this explanation for the new abundance:

...luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property. The diligent mechanic and the skilful artist, who have obtained no share in the division of the earth, receive a voluntary tax from the possessors of land; and the latter are prompted, by a sense of interest, to improve those estates, with whose produce they may purchase additional pleasures. This operation, the particular effects of which are felt in every society, acted with much more diffusive energy in the Roman world. The provinces would soon have been exhausted of their wealth, if the manufactures and commerce of luxury had not insensibly restored to the industrious subjects the sums which were exacted from them by the arms and authority of Rome (1977, vol. I, p.48).

Once the voice of protest, Stoicism now became the theme of a new patriotism. The heroes of the early second century were the first century Stoics who had given their lives in the struggle against absolutism (Birley, 1987). A diplomat named Plutarch retired to the little town of Charonea and devoted himself to interpreting Western antiquity’s most famous biographies in the light of what was now the dominant philosophy. Crowds flocked to Nicopolis to listen to Epictetus, arguably the second greatest of the Stoic teachers. Epictetus had been a slave, but the philosophy’s greatest proponent, and the man through whose writing its teachings were handed on to eighteenth century economics, was an emperor.

IV. Marcus Aurelius

He was born in AD 121, at almost exactly the high point of what Gibbon (1977, vol. I, p.70) described as “the period in the history of the world, during which the human race was most happy and prosperous.” It was a time much like our own. Most people were more interested in athletic contests than in the affairs of state:

Epictetus offers a vivid description of Roman fanaticism over gladiatorial contests and chariot races, the partisans of the Whites, Reds, Blues, and Greens debating endlessly over the merits of their respective teams. "Freedom" had come to mean order, stability, regularity, and the maintenance of ancient social distinctions (Birley, 1987): "as to liberty," said Plutarch, "we have that which the government leaves us; and perhaps it would not be good if we had any more" (quoted in Durant, 1944, p.463). Like motivational speakers in modern America, "philosophers" toured the Empire offering easy answers to difficult questions. Two of the young Marcus Aurelius's teachers, in fact, had gained both reputation and wealth on the lecture circuit.

The education of Roman children was for long centuries entrusted to private enterprise, but late in the first century Vespasian brought the more important schools of rhetoric under imperial control by turning professors into imperial employees, complete with government pensions. Early in the second century, the financing of secondary education became a municipal responsibility (Durant, 1944). Marcus Aurelius said he was grateful that rather than sending him to a public school, his father had decided to have him educated at home (Birley, 1987).

He was referring to his maternal grandfather, Antoninus Pius, who had adopted three-month-old Marcus when the boy's father died (Birley, 1987). The Emperor Hadrian, a frequent visitor in the home, took a liking to the child, and when Antoninus Pius was selected to succeed Hadrian, it was with the specific provision that Marcus Aurelius would succeed Antoninus Pius. The young man mastered the tasks of government in a series of political appointments, the offices assigned carrying increasing authority as he moved toward maturity. When he became Emperor in 161 AD, he was as well prepared for the job as anyone could have been.

He had unfortunately no experience with military action, the necessity for which confronted him as soon as he assumed the throne. A half century of peace had encouraged Rome's leaders to neglect what Smith (1937, p.653) called "the first duty of the sovereign, that of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies." Attacks from Parthia (modern day Iran) and the tribes of Germany caught the Romans off guard. Marcus Aurelius sold the assets of the imperial household to raise funds, sent one army south, and marched at the head of the

other, which went to fight along the Danube. In between the battles of the years that followed, he recorded his thoughts in a diary, which he entitled "To Myself." Found among his things after he died, it has come down to us as *Meditations*.

V. From Marcus Aurelius to Adam Smith

The ideas contained in this slim volume seem to mark its author as a libertarian. At one point, he comes close to suggesting that the German tribesmen have as much right to occupy the land as the Romans do to keep them off it. "A spider is proud of catching a fly," he wrote (1964, pp.155–56); "so is one man of trapping a hare or another of netting a sprat, or a third of capturing boars or Sarmatians." ("Sarmatians" was the generic term for the people who lived along the Danube.) "If you go into the question of principles, are these anything but robbers one and all?"

Sentiments of this kind are not what one expects in the diary of a general recording his thoughts within a few miles of the battle, yet they appear on every page. *Meditations* is a book about taking responsibility for one's own life, no matter what the pressures for relinquishing control. It has in consequence a great deal to say about what modern writers (e.g., Postrel, 1998, p.113) have referred to as "local knowledge." The wise man, said Marcus Aurelius (1964, p.56), "confines his operations to his own concerns, having his attention fixed on his own particular thread of the universal web." This was the way to both personal effectiveness and peace of mind: "Those who criticize you have their own reason to guide them and their own impulse to prompt them; you must not let your eyes stray toward them but keep a straight course and follow your own nature" (p.78).

Focus on the issues of your own life, Aurelius (1964) advised, because that is how you can make the maximum possible contribution to the good of the universe. To each individual thing Nature has assigned enough time and energy, and in the case of human beings, enough intelligence, for a limited number of tasks. The wise person therefore concentrates his attention on what is actually before him. "To one man falls this share of the task, to another that" (p.100), and each knows better than any other how his share of the job should be performed: "Does the sun think to do the rain's work?" (p.156).

If the young Adam Smith was not already familiar with ideas of this kind before leaving home, he would certainly have been exposed

to them at Glasgow. An important element of the Scottish Enlightenment was what has been called “Christian Stoicism,” a leading proponent of which was Smith's teacher, Francis Hutcheson (Clarke, 2000). Smith's interest in the Stoics was encouraged by his participation in Hutcheson's noontime “private” class. It could also be that when he learned about Hutcheson's translation of *Meditations*, he self-interestedly developed a preference for Marcus Aurelius.

In TMS, Smith repeatedly acknowledges his debt to the Stoics. In the sixth edition he says, “In Part Seventh, I have brought together the greater part of the different passages concerning the Stoical Philosophy, which, in the former Editions, had been scattered about in different parts of the work” (2002, p.3). In spite of this attempt at concentration, he refers to Stoic authors and Stoic principles throughout the book. The way in which he argues his case, moreover, seems directly traceable to the work of Marcus Aurelius. *Meditations* often refers to moral conviction in terms of the judgment passed by the “self that has retreated from public view” (the “soul” or “helmsman”) on the behavior of the external man (Clay, 2006, pp.xvi-xvii). What Marcus Aurelius (2006, p.19) called “the very god that is seated in you, bringing your impulses under its control, scrutinizing your thoughts” becomes in Smith (p.158) “reason, principle, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within,” an “impartial spectator” (e.g., p.129) who passes a cool and honest judgment on all we think or do.

Notable also in TMS is Smith's emphasis on the Stoic belief that each individual is better suited than anyone else to decide on how best to make his contribution to the good of the whole:

That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections, as well as of every other part of nature, seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of every individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and understanding (2002, p.270).

The Stoic influence is less obvious in WN, but it is not hard to find. What is arguably the book's most famous passage seems not

merely to echo Stoic sentiments but even to pick up on the central theme of *Meditations*:

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention (Smith, 1937, p.423).

Smith may here be interpreted as repeating the Stoic argument that in attending to his own business each individual is making the maximum possible contribution to the good of the whole. The opening sentence of the next paragraph seems to agree with Marcus Aurelius' conviction that no one is as well qualified as the individual concerned to decide exactly what his contribution should be:

What is the species of domestic industry which his capital can employ, and of which the produce is likely to be the greatest value, every individual, it is evident, can, in his local situation, judge much better than any statesman or lawgiver can do for him (1937, p.423).

Because this is true, Smith favored limitations on the power of the state, in effect agreeing with Marcus Aurelius (1964, p.39) that the best of all possible governments would be one that was “concerned primarily to uphold the liberty of the subject.” A more concise summary of the libertarian position would be difficult to find.

VI. Conclusion

“Greece was the mother of Europe,” wrote Alfred North Whitehead (1925, p.14), “and it is to Greece that we must look in order to find the origin of our modern ideas.” He was thinking specifically of mathematics and the natural sciences, but his words apply to all of the intellectual disciplines. Quite as much as those of physics or biology or chemistry, the ideas that drive modern libertarianism have come to us only after a long journey. Among the way stations on their trek were the ideas of Adam Smith, and before him the medieval scholastics mentioned by Rothbard, and before

them the Roman Stoics, and before any of them the students of Zeno, listening to their teacher on the steps of the painted porch in Athens.

The more distant roads by means of which these ideas may have made their way are hidden in the misty valleys of time. Zeno's philosophy includes elements that go back to Heraclitus of Ephesus, a city whose intellectual and cultural life contained what Durant (1939, p.143) called "a strong Eastern element," doubtless the product of a busy commerce with the farthest shores of the Mediterranean and maybe reaching even to ancient India. The author of Ecclesiastes seems to have been right: "There is nothing new under the sun" – least of all the deep truths about the relationship between personal liberty and economic progress.

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