ON STOIC COSMOPOLITANISM:
A RESPONSE TO NUSSBAUM’S PATRIOTISM AND COSMOPOLITANISM

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ABSTRACT: Martha Nussbaum gives a timely and interesting exhortation of Stoic ideals in Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism, but any implementation of these ancient ideals may have very serious consequences, as they certainly did in antiquity. Material consequences (loosely speaking) are not the purpose of a Stoic sage’s actions. Yet if prudence is to be the virtue for us that it was to our philosophical ancestors then, would-be Stoics are obligated to be very careful in making decisions for a cosmopolitan worldview, especially if we are to approach our future based on ideals over which even the ancients argued.

You desire to LIVE “according to Nature”? Oh, you noble Stoics, what fraud of words!

-Nietzsche

Martha Nussbaum gives a timely and interesting exhortation of Stoic ideals in *Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism*, but any implementation of these ancient ideals may have very serious consequences, as they certainly did in antiquity. Material consequences (loosely speaking) are not the purpose of a Stoic sage’s actions. Yet if prudence is to be the virtue for us that it was to our philosophical ancestors then, would-be Stoics are obligated to be very careful in making decisions for a cosmopolitan worldview, especially if we are to approach our future based on ideals over which even the ancients argued. Nussbaum writes:

[The Stoics held that] we should not allow differences of nationality or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings. We should recognize humanity wherever it occurs, and give its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity, our first allegiance and respect. (p. 308)

But what is Stoic cosmopolitanism? Is Stoic cosmopolitanism a viable movement today? That is, can it provide us with a modern ethic? Stoic cosmopolitanism, though as important a concept now as it was in antiquity, has always been a fluid application of core tenets throughout the ancient world. I argue that we must understand the different historical applications of those tenets if we are to apply the same maxims to our future decisions and actions. I give a brief history of Stoic social thought and then propose to clarify some difficulties of the Stoic core beliefs as represented by Nussbaum, and discuss some implications of her own Stoic cosmopolitanism.

**Nussbaum’s Stoicism**

For Nussbaum, Stoic cosmopolitanism recognizes what is most fundamental in people, what is “most worthy of respect and acknowledgement: their aspirations to justice and goodness and their capacities for reasoning in this connection.” She rightly points out
that Stoics did not give up their allegiances to their nations (more pronounced in the works of the later Stoics), but rather saw themselves as surrounded by concentric circles: starting with the center (ourselves) and ending with the largest one, all humanity. For Nussbaum, this means that “we should also work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, [and] base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality…” (All on p. 309) What Nussbaum does not mention here is the fact that the Stoa was a school of philosophy that lasted several hundred years with various different thinkers from all over the Hellenistic and Roman world. Different generations of Stoic philosophers had to contextualize the Stoic account to meet the concrete circumstances of their own time and place. To speak of any kind of Stoic (cosmo)polis arguably meant something very different in the 3rd century BCE than it did in the 2nd century CE. To fully understand where a new cosmopolitanism (and a modern Stoicism) needs to go we must try to piece together (very briefly) where it has been, and how new information and circumstances added to Stoic high-minded ideals of antiquity can decipher a Stoic cosmopolitan future.

The Evolution of Stoic Cosmopolitanism

The Stoics’ cosmopolitanism was influenced by the work of earlier philosophers, and the theories of these earlier thinkers underwent many revisions or at least different applications in the history of the school. Heraclitus states, ‘[f]or those who are awake there is a single and common cosmos; each of those who are asleep turns himself away to the private one.’ (Fragment 89) This obscure philosopher’s conception of unity (for those who can listen to it) played a large role in later Stoic political philosophy. For Heraclitus, only those with true understanding “realize that the logos of the universe is a single principle, making it the ordering of things for all.” (Schofield p. 77) As we shall see below, Heraclitus’s vision of unity of the universe sets the stage for Stoic physics, and reappears in the works of Chrysippus and the entire Stoic tradition.

Plato’s Socrates helped pave the way for cosmopolitan Stoic view that “it is virtue rather than birth that defines the aristocrat.” (Richter p. 28) In the Meno, Socrates showed

1 Contra Vogt, I am disinclined to attribute cosmopolitanism in its full sense until late Stoicism, hence the awkward parentheses. (Cf. Richter Ch. 1)
2 Discussions of the Sophists as recorded in the works of Plato may have contributed to later cosmopolitan thought, especially Hippias in the Protagoras. (Baldry pp. 42-3) However, I agree with Carson that there is no solid justification for “finding dawns of cosmopolitanism in the Sophists.” (p. 10)
that neither aristocratic birth (Meno’s position) nor Athenian autochthony (Anytus’s) has the monopoly on wisdom when he demonstrated that a slave boy has the same capacity for virtue as anyone else, and the same type of soul. Moreover, he gave examples of men who did not incur the virtues of their noble fathers. (Ibid. pp. 32-33) So one is required neither to be of noble birth nor a citizen by birth in order to be virtuous. Zeno’s subsequent philosophy was a nod to this revolutionary concept, but it was also a critique of the undemocratic class system of the Republic. (Erskine Ch. 1)

The Cynics, particularly Diogenes, have often been seen to be the first cosmopolitans. Diogenes coined the term, at least. ‘I am a citizen of the world’ in this case seems to be a negative claim, however. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Cosmopolitanism 1.1) That is, the Cynics were not to be held accountable for public service or social customs because their homeland was that of the entire universe, not whatever city streets they happen to occupy. Diogenes is said to have opposed ‘nature to custom,’ that is, he conformed to the universal laws of nature rather than the particular opinions of residents in whatever cities he inhabited. (Diogenes Laertius Vit. Phil 6.38, cited from Richter p. 55n.1)

Zeno, who was probably writing a response to Plato’s Republic, envisioned a classical polis where cognitive ability was the trait that differentiated the true citizen from the outsider. The capacity for citizenship depends on the individual’s soul to reason. (Ibid. pp. 63-65) This opened the way for the later type of Roman Stoic cosmopolitanism that Nussbaum discusses. The extant evidence suggests that early Stoicism under Zeno did not envision a completely cosmopolitan world-view, but a classical polis-type society within a polis: a community of the wise within a city-state (where the non-wise were non-citizens or foreigners). An idealized Sparta of the archaic and classical age probably served as a model for Zeno’s Republic. He seems to have praised a communistic political system based on sublimated erotic love, which for Zeno typically meant homosexual love, (Diogenes Laertius 101.129) but not necessarily so (Schofield Ch.2). A later Stoic, the eventual scholarch Chrysippus, seems to have followed the logical implications of cosmopolitanism as presented by Zeno to include the entire universe as a city of gods and wise men. He uses Heraclitean language of law as king of all things human and divine to examine how in fact social rational beings are required to behave. (Schofield pp. 74-84)

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3 Democritus’s one sentence, even if genuinely attributed, is not enough.
4 This reading is disputed by Mole in Yamakawa. (p. 185)
5 Vogt disagrees. (p. 68)
6 All texts of Diogenes Laertius are numbered according to Gerson & Inwood’s translation. (The Stoic Reader)
Here Zeno’s Ideal City led to a weird chapter of Stoic history: the Borysthenean Stoic Sphaerus’s role in the reforms of King Cleomenes III of Sparta (Nussbaum takes a historical digression [p. 313] and so will I). Hellenistic Sparta by this time was not the great military power known for the virtuous character of its inhabitants and their adherence to a well-ordered constitution that the classical *polis* was thought to be, but an increasingly irrelevant, badly-governed, and poorly-educated state. *(Are you listening, my compatriots?)* This noble but somewhat ironic episode of a younger Lakedaemonian ruler reforming his kingdom by cancelling debts and distributing wealth and citizenship among his worthy but disenfranchised inhabitants may have been an attempt to bring about the Ideal City of the early Stoa, albeit with a decisively Spartan flavor.\(^7\) Ancient Lycurgan mythology became reformist ideology (a modern cynic would call it propaganda). This has been reviled by Polybius and romanticized by Phylarchus, and later by Plutarch.\(^8\)

There may have been a degree of tension in the scholastic ideology between Sphaerus and his fellow Stoic Chrysippus, who became the head of the Stoic school after Cleanthes’s death. These colleagues may have disagreed on the importance of traditional pedagogy, with Sphaerus following Zeno (and not Chrysippus) in positing that education as typically practiced in his time was useless for achieving virtue. (Diogenes Laertius 1.37, 101.129) Possibly Sphaerus’s reforms and reinvention on the archaic Spartan *agoge* may have been his way of confirming his and Zeno’s theory (who probably had Sparta in mind when he wrote the *Republic*) on what is in fact necessary for a proper education in virtue, an education emphasized by Stoic fortitude and, now, Spartan toughness. (Kennell p.102) The rising of the disenfranchised and impoverished masses in the Peloponnese (who were expecting such radical changes to be implemented in their *polis* as well by the occupation of the Spartans and a Stoic-influenced hegemon) during the volatile Hellenistic era arguably caused a change in later Stoic political thought among the richest and most influential of the Stoics. From Panaetius onward there was no further move for a major cultural change in Greece by any educated and wealthy citizen with philosophical leanings to bring about the material equality of all rational beings.\(^9\) Instead of the more political (and economical) pseudo-cosmopolitanism of Zeno and Sphaerus, Stoic justice typically emphasized only moral

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\(^7\) T. Africa takes a radically different view, but his cynicism is unwarranted. (p. 10)
\(^8\) My position discussed elsewhere: *On Cleomenes and Sphaerus: How Stoic was the Spartan King?*
\(^9\) Blossius is the Roman exception that proves the rule.
cosmopolitanism: the agent’s quest for virtue in the context of his own society. Typically, late Stoic cosmopolitanism differed from that of the Cynics and early Stoics in its “this-worldly character.” (Gueye p. 7) Where the Cynics promoted individual freedom, and the early Stoics’ “cosmopolitanism” applied to the wise in a polis, the Roman philosophers saw cosmopolitanism as a distinctly moral concern (Ibid. p. 8).

Since what Nussbaum takes to be Stoic cosmopolitanism is only the paradigm put forth by the later Stoics, I shall discuss them at length here. Nussbaum’s arguments for (late) Stoic cosmopolitanism do not mention an important factor, and this omission opens the door for criticism. She mentions Hierocles, whose version of Stoic cosmopolitanism includes the famous paradigm of concentric circles of moral concern based on the tenet of oikeiosis (appropriation) that was crucial to Stoic ethics, biology, and physics. (p. 309) Therefore according to at least some later Stoics: understanding our proper actions toward others means understanding what exactly the human animal is, what it does naturally from birth, and hence what makes an animal a good member of its kind. According to Stobaeus, Hierocles states:

[Sensation] contributes to knowledge of the first thing which is appropriate, the subject [which] would be the best starting point for the elements of ethics. [As] soon as an animal is born it perceives itself... The first thing an animal perceives is its own parts... both that they have them and for what purpose they have them, and we ourselves perceive our eyes and our ears and the rest. So whenever we want to see something, we strain our eyes, but not our ears, toward the visible object... Therefore the first proof of every animal’s perceiving itself is its consciousness of its parts and the functions for which they were given. (1.34-9, 51-7, 2.19 italics mine)

In another passage: “Just as our appropriate disposition relative to our children is affection, and to external property, choice, so the animal’s appropriate disposition relative to itself is self-preservation and, to things which contribute to the needs of its constitution, selection”. To live according to nature then, and hence to live virtuously, is to perfect our choices in accordance to what is appropriate to us from birth. Hierocles makes his point that ‘animals are [aware] of..."
their equipment for self-defense’ by an analogy: bulls naturally do battle with other bulls or other animal species by using their horns, ‘as if these were the congenital weapons for the encounter.’ Likewise, every other creature knows has ‘same disposition relative to its appropriate and, so to speak, congenital weapons.’ What Hierocles implies then, and what Nussbaum does not mention (perhaps due to the shortness of her article?) is that humans also have, according to Hierocles, these ‘congenital weapons’ or slightly less militaristically, the ‘appropriate disposition [of] self-preservation.’ Here Hierocles gets to the pith: ‘We are an animal, but a gregarious one which needs someone else as well. For this reason too we inhabit cities; for there is no human being who is not part of a city’. (All above on 9.3-10, 11.14-18)

This is important. Where Nussbaum rightly agrees that reason and moral capacity are the “fundamental ingredients” to humanity, the recipe is missing something: it is the moral capacity of our particular species that entails cosmopolitanism. Sharing in reason alone is no ground to suppose “that two reasoners constitute a community qua reasoners.” What they all have is a

[…] highly general skill which they may employ without interacting, subscribing to common goals, or doing any of these other things which might be thought necessary or sufficient for the creation of a community… Would we speak of the community of crossword puzzle addicts if the only thing they shared was addiction to crossword puzzles, viz. each his or her own private addiction? Probably not. (Schofield, p. 70)

Or to keep with the zoological theme of the Hieroclean passage: In the closest possible world where, say, orangutans are rational agents in any relevant sense, there would follow no cosmopolitanism. This is because orangutans are (generally) not the type of being that requires a community. The reason cosmopolitanism follows from humanity is our gregarious nature. We act according to our nature when we act gregariously. Therefore it is, as Cicero puts it, ‘a natural consequence’ of our oikeiosis, and the idea that each one of us is a part of the world, that ‘we prefer the common advantage to our own.’ (On ends 3.62-8) This matters because it provided, for the Stoics, an impetus to why people should care for one another.14

The importance here lies in understanding the basis of our moral concern for those around us. Nussbaum describes Hierocles’s paradigm of concentric circles but does not mention clearly that Hierocles’s philosophy follows necessarily from the Stoic view of the

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14 Admittedly, it depends perhaps on how much the Stoic ‘appeal to nature’ convinces us these days. For my part, their evidence, based on what passed for empirical observations, is not a defeater to their ethical claims.
nature of a human being. I quote the lengthy passage here for a better understanding than can be gained from Nussbaum’s quick mention:

Each one of us is as it were entirely encompassed by many circles, some smaller, others larger, the latter enclosing the former on the basis of their different and unequal dispositions relative to each other. The first and closest circle is the one which a person has drawn as though around a center, his own mind. The circle encloses the body and anything taken for the sake of the body. For it is virtually the smallest circle, and almost touches the center itself. Next, the second one further removed from the center but enclosing the first circle; this contains parents, siblings, wife, and children. The third one has in it uncles and aunts, grandparents, nephews, nieces, and cousins. The next circle includes other relatives, and this is followed by the circle of local residents, then the circle of fellow-tribesmen, next that of fellow-citizens, and then in the same way the circle of people from neighboring towns, and the circle of fellow-countrymen. The outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race.

[We ought to] draw the circles together somehow toward the center, and to keep zealously transferring those from the enclosing circles into the enclosed ones… it is incumbent on us to respect people from the third circle as if they were from the second, and again to respect our other relatives as if they were those from the third circle. For although the greater distance in blood will remove some affection, we must still try hard to assimilate them. The right point will be reached if, through our own initiative, we reduce the distance of the relationship with each person. (Stobaeus 4.671, 7-673, 11)

An animal perceives itself from birth. This perception leads naturally to its desire for preservation. Since the human is a social, rational animal that depends on other humans for survival, it follows that a human being is virtuous when it acts according to, and perfects, its rational, social nature.

Hierocles uses a paradigm of concentric circles of moral concern to explain the human oikeiosis, where the agent’s mind is in the middle and those of his closest kin and friends out to the entire human race radiate outwards from the center. The virtuous person, acting on this natural inclination, must try to constantly bring others closer into his realm of moral concern.15 (Long & Sedley p. 353) According to Reydams-Schils, we see Seneca add time to this paradigm of the concentric circles of moral concern. Now this, which is an (admittedly confusing) cone of moral concern, implies that “as the span of time widens, so

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15 Forman-Barzilai errs when she states that a Stoic acts contrary to nature by approximating those further out in our circles of concern. (p. 8) A Stoic acts according to his or her nature by going further than what nature demands for mere survival. Even in the most charitable interpretation of her statement, it is a mistake to suggest a Stoic would ever advocate acting contrary to nature. Also (whether this is her view or what she interprets to be Adam Smith’s view), the mistranslation of apatheia into “apathy” instead of the more accurate term ‘equanimity’ confuses the Stoic message. (Also p. 121)
ideally would our social horizon.” (p. 31) Later, Epictetus in form typical of the late Stoics, stated that our duties are defined by our social roles: ‘Each of these titles (e.g. father, son, councilor, young, old, etc.) rationally considered, always suggest the action appropriate to it.’ (2.10.1-12) Taken together, in order to be virtuous we must act in accordance with our social roles within what Hierocles defines as our human community. But what is our social role in relevance to a cosmopolitan future? This is a more difficult dish to prepare than one gathers from first reading Nussbaum’s recipe for Stoic cosmopolitanism.

**Human Rights: Incoherence in Our New Stoic Education**

Nussbaum argues for education to adopt Stoic cosmopolitanism. She gives plausible arguments for making “world citizenship, rather than democratic or national citizenship, the focus for civic education.” (p. 310) She believes that we (presumably Americans but not necessarily so) learn more about ourselves, and suggests we can learn more by studying other. If we are to take our place in the 21st century as a cosmopolitan nation, than we must see what our role will be in cosmopolitan world.

Values on which Americans may most justly pride themselves are, in a deep sense, Stoic values: respect for human dignity and the opportunity for each person to pursue happiness. If we really do believe that all human beings are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, we are morally required to think about what the conception requires us to do with and for the rest of the world. (p. 311)

There is a problem here: Nussbaum believes that through a cosmopolitan education we would “recognize moral obligations to the rest of the world that are real and that otherwise would go unnoticed.” (p. 311) True, but the American belief that human beings are “endowed with certain inalienable rights” is not quite a Stoic cosmopolitanism. She comes close to discussing the incoherence in the argument above when she suggests that the organic model of Stoicism could be “abused” if it is “taken to deny the fundamental importance of the separateness of people and of fundamental political liberties.” (p. 310) As Sorabji points out, it is difficult to defend a Stoic concept of human rights. As human beings, we are indeed naturally and morally obligated to extend justice to all human beings, but in the end the satisfaction of human needs is, to the Stoics, an indifferent. (p.100) The *kathekonta* (appropriate acts) have indeed been accomplished when the agent has done everything in her power to be just. Natural rights do not follow from Stoic moral obligations because a person
is not harmed in any moral way when “human needs” are not satisfied. Sorabji writes that the “list of situations for rescuing people is a set of targets; the goal remains the rescuer’s virtue.” (p.102) So when Nussbaum states that American values are Stoic values (respect for human dignity and the opportunity for each person to pursue happiness), a Stoic can only reinterpret the subsequent “certain inalienable rights” to be the individual’s inalienable right to face his circumstances with equanimity. Even this is misleading, since no one can violate this action except the agent. (Ibid. p. 102) One may perhaps accept her general point on different grounds, but this is not a coherent Stoic cosmopolitanism.

Stoic Prudence

Nussbaum rightly agrees that a Stoic cosmopolitanism does not mean we are not permitted to give our own locality a special degree of concern. (p. 309) But as she points out, if we indeed believe as our forefathers did (generally with huge qualifications, unfortunately) in the equality of men, then there is no defensible reason why these high-minded Stoic ideals end at the borders of our nation. Yet if we take Epictetus’s advice of duties being ‘broadly based on social roles’ to our nation as a whole then it may help to understand what we as Americans do best, and what our collaborative ‘social role’ requires us to do. At the very least, the United States does well in exporting our culture and our military. Presumably we can do for virtuous reasons what we have done on some occasions for (perhaps) decadent and solely self-interested reasons. This is no easy task. She writes:

[In making choices about] both political and economic matters we should most seriously consider the right of other human beings to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, and…we should work to acquire the knowledge that will enable us to deliberate well about those rights. (p. 312)

To take Nussbaum’s approach to Stoic cosmopolitanism seriously is to be ready to follow our line of reasoning wherever it leads. Nussbaum writes, we are in fact “morally required to think about what the conception requires us to do with and for the rest of the world” and there is no morally defensible reason that these values, “which instruct us to join hands across boundaries of ethnicity, class, gender, and race, [should] lose steam when they get to the borders of the nation.” (p. 312) If our roles, ‘rationally considered, always suggest the action appropriate to it’ as Epictetus said, and we truly believe in the equality of, and
extension of justice to, all humans, then we must be ready as a first-world nation to act accordingly. But how does that cash out?

**Conclusion**

Nussbaum praises a Stoic cosmopolitan future, but what kind of Stoic cosmopolitanism will it be? Despite the cautious optimism of Nussbaum’s Stoic leanings, it is not clear what our new cosmopolitanism might become. This is arguably why the Roman Stoics moved to a more legalistic view of social justice, in order to avoid what some believed to be the ‘failures’ of the non-wise (fools) deciding what should be called a utopian cosmopolis.\(^\text{16}\) Like the implications of Nussbaum’s high-minded Stoic ideals, there remain many questions on what these policies will entail. Among them: Is our (inter)national cosmopolitanism to be the biology-based, naturally self-extending/humanity-collapsing-on-itself, Hieroclean concentric circles of a new virtue ethic? The pseudo-cosmopolitanism of intellectuals analogous to the Republic of Zeno? The theoretical and theological cosmopolitanism of Chrysippus? The warrior education in virtue implemented by the pragmatic Sphaerus? The role-defined, deeply existential cosmopolitanism of Epictetus? Or might it become the Lakedaemonian spear of Cleomenes’s Stoicism, if that is our lot?

**REFERENCES**


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\(^{16}\) Though certainly no Stoics, the theocratic thugs of the Islamic State could argue that they seek a cosmopolis, and I do not hesitate to call them fools.


