

A HARSH WORD
Cynic means "like a dog," and the most famous of all the cynic philosophers, Diogenes, explained his nickname: "I am called a dog because I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I sink my teeth in morsels." The word "cynic" is still in use today, but has come to mean someone who always takes the lowest possible opinion of the motivations of others.

THE CYNICS

THE DROPOUTS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

The Cynics rejected all social conventions. They were the first of four major schools of Greek philosophy which emerged after the fall of Athens.



"Truly, if I were not Alexander I would wish to be Diogenes"

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

ARISTOTLE'S PUPIL Alexander the Great changed history in a way that affected the development of philosophy. In an astoundingly short time he conquered more or less the whole world as it was known to the ancient Greeks, from Italy to India, including most of what is now called the Middle East, together with vast areas of North Africa. The independence of the Greek city states came to an end as they were swallowed up in Alexander's empire, and they lost their cultural dominance.

Everywhere he went, Alexander founded new cities, from which his conquests were to be administered, and these he colonized with Greeks. The colonists mostly married local women, so the populations of these cities quickly became cosmopolitan, but their ruling ethos and language remained everywhere Greek. The upshot was that the whole of the ancient world came to be run from "Greek" cities that were not in Greece, and whose populations were multiracial and multilingual. That world is known as the Hellenistic world. Its most important city was the one which Alexander named after himself, Alexandria, in Egypt. This became the chief international center



THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL LIBRARY
Alexandria's library was the world's most valuable for nearly a thousand years, from 290 BC to AD 646.

of culture and learning, the site of the most important library the ancient world ever possessed. The Hellenistic age of which it was the cultural capital lasted for some three hundred years, from the downfall of the Greek city states in the 4th century BC to the rise of the Roman

Empire in the 1st century BC. During that time the culture and civilization of ancient Greece became propagated throughout the ancient world. These were the circumstances in which the Roman Republic emerged, and in which the Roman Empire struggled to establish itself. It was also the world into which Christianity was born, and explains why - although Palestine was a Roman colony - the New Testament was written in Greek.

THE FIRST TWO CYNICS

Immediately after the death of Alexander his empire broke up into warring factions - so, while the cultural unity that he had created continued, there was incessant strife and conflict at the political level. All four of the new schools of philosophy that flourished during this period - the Cynics, the Sceptics, the Epicureans, and the Stoics - reflect that fact. All of them are concerned with how a civilized man is to live in an insecure, unstable, and dangerous world.

The first of these to appear were the Cynics. They were what we would now call dropouts. Their progenitor was Antisthenes, a disciple of Socrates and near-contemporary of Plato. Until he was middle-aged he lived a conventional life in that aristocratic circle of philosophers. But with the death of Socrates and the fall of Athens Antisthenes' world came to an end, whereupon he decided to opt out and embrace a basic, simple life. He started dressing like a laborer, and living

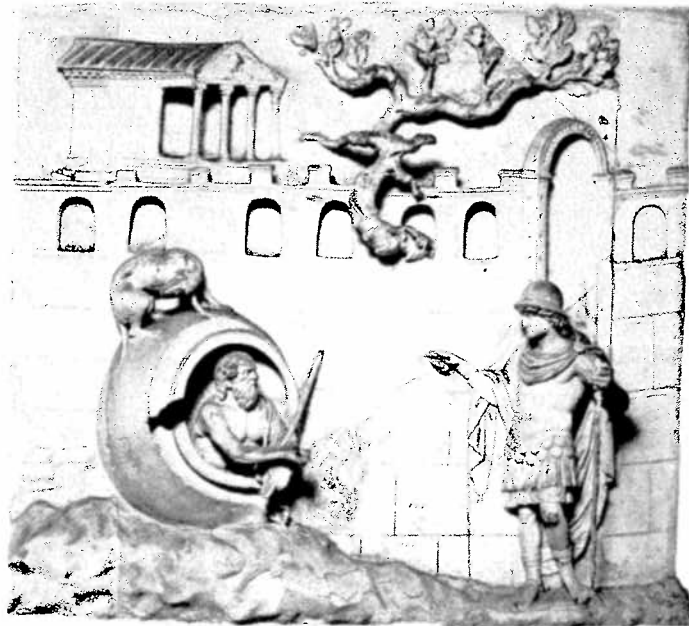
“ I AM A CITIZEN OF THE WORLD ”

DIOGENES

AN EPIGRAPH FOR
DIOGENES
*An epitaph raised in
Athens to the memory
of Diogenes read:*
“Say, dog, I pray,
what guard you in
that tomb?”
“A dog.”
“His name?”
“Diogenes.”
“From far?”
“Sinope.”
“He who made a tub
his home?”
“The same. Now,
dead, among the stars
a star.”

and foreigner – so when asked what his country was he replied: “I am a citizen of the world,” and in doing so coined the single Greek word in which he expressed that thought, “cosmopolitan,” a concept for which many have been grateful to him.

There are many good stories about Diogenes. The most famous is that when Alexander the Great came to visit him in his filthy hole and stood in the entrance asking if there was anything that he, the ruler of the entire world, could do for him, Diogenes replied “Yes – you can stand out of my light.” There is no doubt that he meant this figuratively as well as literally. It is possibly the most eloquent put-down of worldly values that a philosopher has ever managed to deliver.



DIOGENES BEING VISITED BY ALEXANDER

In a confrontation of two whole value systems, the conqueror of the world meets the philosopher who rejected worldly values, preferring to live like a dog

ALEXANDER: PHILOSOPHER AND SCIENTIST

Not only a great warrior, Alexander was in part responsible for spreading Greek culture throughout the ancient world. This medieval illumination shows Alexander exploring the seabed in a glass diving bell.

among the poor, and he proclaimed that he wanted no government, no private property, no marriage, and no established religion.

Antisthenes had a follower who became more famous than himself, a man called Diogenes (404-323 BC). Diogenes aggressively flouted all the conventions, and deliberately shocked people, whether by not washing or by dressing, if at all, in filthy rags, or living in a burial urn, or eating disgusting food, or committing flagrant acts of public indecency. He lived like a dog; and for this reason people gave him the nickname “Cynic” (from the Greek word *kynikos*) which means “like a dog.” This is how the word, which we still use, was coined. But its meaning has changed over time.

THE FIRST COSMOPOLITAN

Diogenes and his followers were not cynics in today’s sense of the word. They had a positive belief in virtue. But their basic creed was that the difference between true values and false values was the only distinction that mattered: all other distinctions were rubbish – all social conventions, for instance, such distinctions as those between yours and mine, public and private, naked and clothed, raw and cooked – all that was nonsense. Diogenes had the same contempt for the distinction between Greek



CARNEADES (214-129 BC)
A formidable debater, Carneades succeeded Arcesilaus both as head of Plato's Academy and as the leading proponent of Scepticism of the day. He was especially effective in criticizing the rival philosophies of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

THE SCEPTICS

THE FIRST RELATIVISTS IN PHILOSOPHY

Scepticism as a philosophy was launched on its long and influential career by one of Alexander the Great's soldiers.

IN THE BROADEST SENSE of the word "scepticism" there had long been a certain tradition of it in Greek philosophy. Xenophanes had taught that, although we can always learn more than we know, we can never be sure that we have reached any final truth. Socrates said that the only thing he knew was that he did not know anything. However, Socrates did at least believe that knowledge was possible, and, what is more, he was bent on acquiring some, while Xenophanes believed that we could lessen the degree of our ignorance if we made the effort. Both men took a positive attitude towards enquiry and the possibility of learning.

ARGUING BOTH WAYS

The first person to make scepticism the be-all and end-all of his thought - to adopt it as being in itself a philosophy, so to speak, and one consisting of an active refusal to believe anything - was

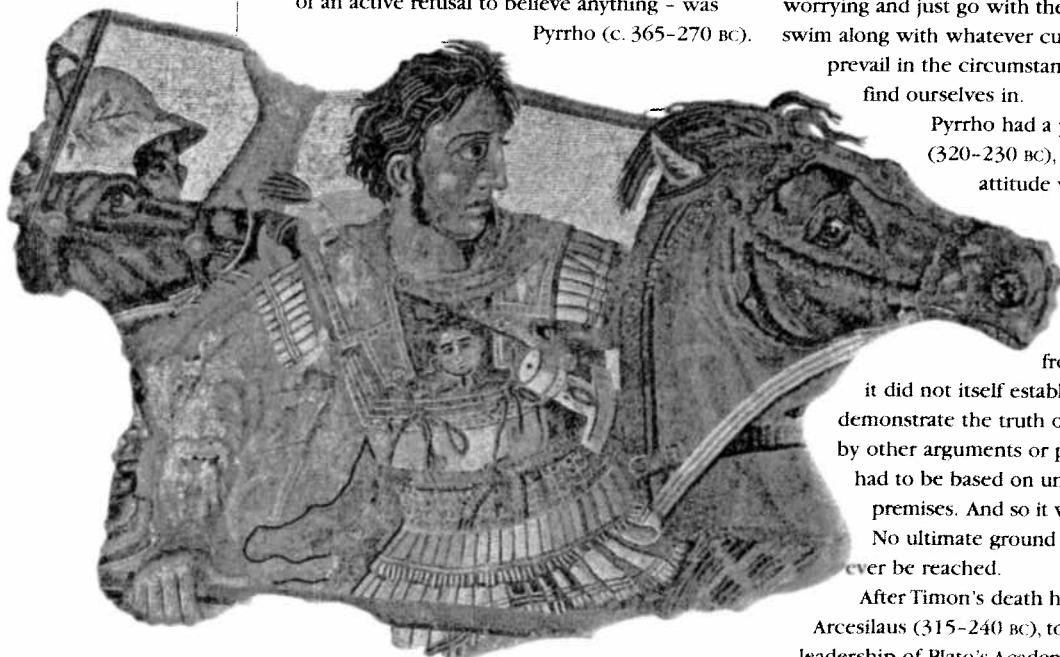
Pyrrho (c. 365-270 BC).

He launched a whole school of philosophers that became known as Sceptics; and their brand of systematic, all-embracing philosophical Scepticism is to this day sometimes referred to as Pyrrhonism.

Pyrrho had served as a soldier with Alexander the Great, and had campaigned with him as far afield as India. Seeing such a huge diversity of countries and peoples seems to have impressed on him the diversity of opinions that are to be found among human beings. For almost everywhere believed by the people in one place there seem to be people somewhere else who believe the opposite. And normally the arguments are equally good on both sides - or so it seemed to Pyrrho. All we can do is go by things as they appear to be, but appearances are notoriously deceptive, so we should never assume the truth of one explanation rather than any other. The best thing was to stop worrying and just go with the flow, that is to say swim along with whatever customs and practices prevail in the circumstances we happen to find ourselves in.

Pyrrho had a pupil, Timon of Phlius (320-230 BC), who supported this attitude with more substantial intellectual argument. In particular he pointed out that every argument or proof proceeds from premises which it did not itself establish. If you tried to demonstrate the truth of those premises by other arguments or proofs then *they* had to be based on undemonstrated premises. And so it went on, *ad infinitum*. No ultimate ground of certainty could ever be reached.

After Timon's death his successor, Arcesilaus (315-240 BC), took over the leadership of Plato's Academy, which then remained in the hands of the Sceptics for two hundred years. Arcesilaus had two main teaching methods: one was to expound equally powerful



POWER AFFECTS IDEAS

Alexander the Great had a bigger side-effect on the way Western philosophy developed than any other ruler: he destroyed the independence of the Greek city states in which philosophy had come to fruition, while making Greek a universal language.

arguments on both sides of a question; the other was to offer to refute any case put forward by one of his students. His successor as head of the Academy, Carneades (214-129 BC), made a great stir on a visit to Rome by giving a series of public lectures, in the first of which he forcefully expounded the views of Plato and Aristotle on justice, and then in his second lecture refuted everything he had said in the first.

NO ULTIMATE CERTAINTY

Scepticism has had a permanently important part to play in the history of philosophy, from that day to this. Chiefly it is because certainty is simply not available at the level of argument, demonstration, or proof - although it was not until the 20th century that this became generally acknowledged, so the pursuit of certainty was destined to play a centrally important role in the historical development of philosophy. What a valid argument proves is that its conclusions follow from its premises, but that is not at all the same as proving that those conclusions are true. Every valid argument starts with an "if": if p is true then q must be true. But that leaves open the question of whether or not p is true. The argument itself cannot prove that, because it has already



THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Alexander's empire was identified by its inhabitants with civilization, as if surrounded by a wall of fire. It established what we know as the Hellenistic world, which lasted for hundreds of years and within which the universal language was Greek - which is why the New Testament was written in Greek.

"BY SCEPTICISM... WE ARRIVE FIRST AT SUSPENSION OF JUDGEMENT, AND SECOND AT FREEDOM FROM DISTURBANCE"

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

assumed it, and to have assumed already what it sets out to prove would be to move in a vicious circle.

So every "proof" rests on unproven premises; and this is as true in logic, mathematics, and science as it is in everyday life. Even so, it does not follow from this that we have no better grounds for any one set of beliefs than for any other: to say that would be

untrue. However, the working out of these tricky distinctions was to be a long and troublesome business in the history of philosophy.

The most famous Sceptical philosopher of more recent centuries is the Scotsman David Hume (see pp.112-17). He qualified his own Scepticism by pointing out that to live at all we have perpetually to make choices, decisions, and this forces us to form judgements about the way things are, whether we like it or not. Since certainty is not available to us we have to make the best assessments we can of the realities we face - and this is incompatible with regarding all alternatives with equal scepticism. Our Scepticism therefore needs to be, as he put it, mitigated. It is indeed doubtful whether anyone could live on the basis of complete Scepticism - or, if they could, whether such a life would be worth living. But this refutation of Scepticism, if refutation it is, is not a logical argument.

In practical life we must steer a middle course between demanding a degree of certainty that we can never have and treating all possibilities as if they were of equal weight when they are not.

KEY WORKS

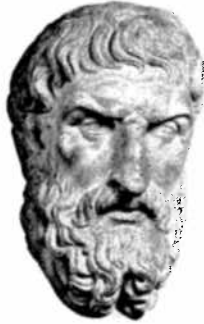
Three books by Sextus Empiricus (c. AD 200) are the source of most of our knowledge of Scepticism in the ancient world:

Outlines of Pyrrhonism
Against the Dogmatists
Against the Professors



SEXTUS EMPIRICUS' PYRRHONIARUM (OUTLINES OF PYRRHONISM)

The fullest account we have of the works of Pyrrho, Scepticism's founder, is from Sextus Empiricus (c. AD 200). Sextus was not himself an original thinker, but he set out other peoples' arguments so well that his writings became influential. In the 4th century St. Gregory publicly denounced him along with Pyrrho for infecting people with "the vile and malignant disease" of Scepticism.



EPICURUS
David Hume, writing in the 18th century, made the following observation: "Epicurus' questions are yet unanswered. Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" A very similar passage occurs in Voltaire. Perhaps Epicurus' questions are still unanswered.

THE EPICUREANS

THE EARLIEST SCIENTIFIC AND LIBERAL HUMANISTS

Like many attitudes of the 20th century, the philosophy of Epicurus was materialistic, pleasure-seeking, and non-religious. It was the first such philosophy to be fully developed intellectually.

OF THE PHILOSOPHIES that were new in the Hellenistic age, two were outstanding in importance and influence, and they were those of the Epicureans and the Stoics.

Epicureanism was very much the creation of a single thinker, Epicurus (c. 341-270 BC). Its aim above all else was to liberate people from fear, not only the fear of death but the fear of life. In an age when all forms of public life were unpredictable and highly dangerous it taught people to seek happiness and fulfillment in their private lives.

"Live unknown" was one of its maxims. This was

completely at odds with all previous ideas of seeking fame and glory, or even wanting something so apparently decent as honor. But Epicureanism was to an unusual degree a fully worked-out philosophy that tried to embrace all aspects of existence. It began with a view of physics.

First of all, Epicurus accepted the atomism of Democritus. He believed that all there was in the material universe were atoms and space, nothing else.

Since it is impossible for atoms to come into existence out of nothing or pass away into nothing they are indestructible and eternal. However, their movements are unpredictable, and no combination that they form ever endures. For this reason, physical objects, all of which are combinations of atoms, are ephemeral. Their life is always a story of atoms coming together and then, eventually, dispersing again. All change in the universe consists either of this endlessly repeated process or of the objects thus formed moving in space.

WOMEN AND SLAVES INCLUDED

We ourselves are among the objects formed in this way. A group of particularly fine atoms comes together to make a body and a mind in the form of a single entity, a human being, whose eventual dispersal is inevitable. But this dispersal is not to be feared. Such a dissolution of the human being means that the entity that we are ceases to exist when we die, and therefore there is no one to whom being dead happens: so long as we exist, death is not, and when death is, we are not. Nor is there anyone to whom those terrors, that so many religions threaten people with after their deaths, can happen. "Death is nothing to us," says Epicurus and anyone who genuinely grasps that truth, deep down, is liberated from fear of death.

As for the gods, Epicurus manages to get them out of the picture without denying their existence (which would have been a dangerous thing for him to do) by saying that they are far, far away and



BACCHUS AND MAENAD
Bacchus, or Dionysos, was the god of the intoxicating powers of Nature. He was associated with orgies - of which the Epicureans were often accused, but of which they actually disapproved.

being gods, they have no desire to become involved in the perpetual mess and turmoil of human affairs. So they are inactive as far as we are concerned, and "we have nothing to hope and nothing to fear" from them. For us, it is as if they do not exist.

Since non-existence is our own inescapable destiny we should make the best of the only life we have. The good life in this life, happiness in this world, should be our aim. The way to achieve this is to have nothing to do with the violence and uncertainties of public life but to withdraw into private communities of like-minded people. And because both our physical health and the maintenance of good personal relationships require it, we should enjoy our pleasures in moderation, though no non-injurious activity needs to be regarded as forbidden in itself.

"DEATH IS NOTHING TO US"

EPICURUS

The communities formed by the Epicureans for these purposes were in principle open to anyone, including women and slaves - a fact which drew a great deal of antagonism towards them from their surrounding societies. When Christianity came on the scene the Epicureans were anathema to Christians in particular, because of their denial of immortality and of the existence of a benevolent God, and also because of their affirmation of the values of this world.

POETIC MASTERPIECE

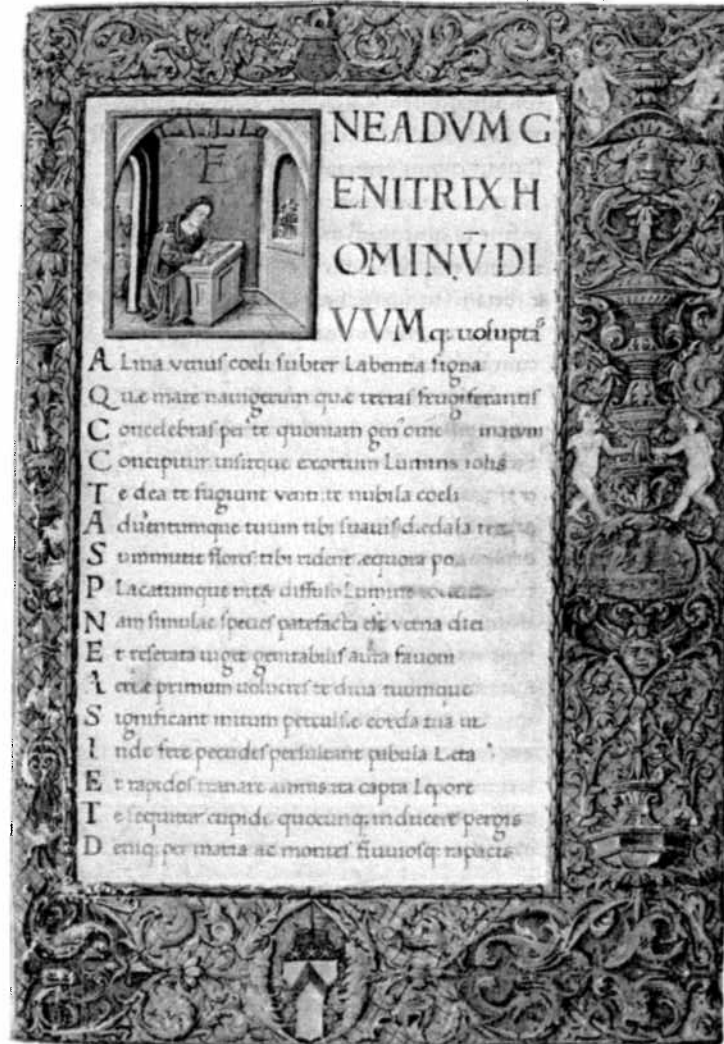
What is striking to us now about Epicureanism is how similar it is, almost point by point, to the scientific and liberal humanism of the 20th century. It was the first thought-through version of an attitude to life that has been widely embraced in our own age. Its most dramatic and widely read articulation was achieved in a long poem written in the Latin language in the 1st century BC, *On the Nature of Things* (*De Rerum Natura*) by Lucretius (c. 95-52 BC). This is one of the supreme masterpieces of Latin literature, and its purpose was to import Epicureanism into Roman culture.

The poet seems to have been somewhat desperately seeking salvation in the philosophy he so passionately embraced, for he himself was intermittently subject to the terrors of madness, and he died eventually by committing suicide. Perhaps because the doctrines of Epicureanism were to such an unusual degree the creation of a single thinker, it remained surprisingly unchanged throughout its long history. In the Middle Ages it was denounced by Christians as Antichrist, and then almost petered out; but it was rediscovered in the 16th and 17th centuries, and had a significant influence on the beginnings of modern science and humanism.



MEMENTO MORI

The skull was used by the Epicureans, as by many others, as a symbol of mortality. Its implied message was: "Enjoy life while you have it."



ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

Lucretius, the supreme Epicurean poet, is shown writing at his desk in this illuminated Christian edition of his pagan masterpiece. The accompanying text is the opening of Book One, his paean of praise to Venus, the goddess of sexual love.



ZENO OF CITIUM
The founder of Stoicism, Zeno, wrote a much admired *Republic* in which he argued for the rule of law and the universal validity of political institutions. With the exception of scattered quotations, none of his writings survive.

KEY WORKS

- The Letters of Seneca*
 - The Discourses of Seneca*
 - The Discourses of Epictetus*
 - The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*
- Excellent histories of Stoicism in the ancient world were written by Cicero, Diogenes, Laertius, and Sextus Empiricus.*

THE STOICS

THE GOVERNING PHILOSOPHY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Since death and adversity are out of our control, and come to everyone, we should meet them with dignified acceptance.

STOICISM AS A PHILOSOPHY continued as an organized movement for some five hundred years. With it, and through it, Western philosophy ceased to be specifically Greek and became international. This was a direct result of Alexander the Great's conquests having spread Greek culture throughout the so-called civilized world - the early Stoic philosophers were mostly Syrians, the later ones mostly Romans. The voices of the most famous of them came from the entire gamut of the social hierarchy, one even being a slave (Epictetus) and another a Roman Emperor (Marcus Aurelius). Stoicism seems to have had a special appeal for emperors. According to a leading authority, "nearly

all the successors of Alexander - we may say all the principal kings in existence in the generations following Zeno - professed themselves Stoics."

Zeno (334-262 BC) of Citium, in Cyprus, was the founder of Stoicism. (He should not be confused with the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea, who was discussed on p.19.) The core of the Stoic philosophy lies in the view that there can be no authority higher than reason. By unpacking the consequences of that belief we arrive at most of the important tenets of Stoic philosophy.



SENECA - A PHILOSOPHER AND POLITICIAN
One of the later Stoics, Seneca, tutor to Nero, was joint chief administrator of the Roman Empire from AD 54-62



MARCUS AURELIUS
This Roman Emperor, who ruled from AD 161 to 180, symbolized for many generations the golden age of the Roman Empire. As a Stoic and philosophical writer, Marcus Aurelius reveals what it can be like when the man at the very apex of power is also a philosopher.

First, the world as our reason presents it to us as being, that is to say the world of Nature, is all that reality there is. There is nothing "higher." And Nature itself is governed by rationally intelligible principles. We ourselves are part of Nature. The spirit of rationality that imbues us and it (and that is to say, everything) is what is meant by God. As thus conceived, God is not outside the world and separate from it, he is all-pervasively in the world - he is, as it were, the mind of the world, the self-awareness of the world.

EMOTIONS ARE JUDGEMENTS

Because we are at one with Nature, and because there is no higher realm, there can be no question of our going anywhere "else" when we die - there is nowhere else to go. We dissolve back into Nature. It is through the ethics evolved from this belief that Stoicism achieved its greatest fame and influence.

Because Nature is governed by rational principles there are reasons why everything is as it is. We cannot change it, nor should we desire to. Therefore our attitude in the face of our own mortality, or what may seem to us personal tragedy should be one of unruffled acceptance. In so far as our emotions rebel against this, our emotions are in the wrong. The Stoics believed that emotions are judgements, and therefore cognitive: they are forms of "knowledge", whether true or false. Greed, for

instance, is the judgement that money is a pre-eminent good and to be acquired by every available means - a false judgement. If all our emotions are made subject to our reason they will embody none but true judgements, and we shall then be at one with things as they actually are.

People who adopted the Stoic philosophy were often able to endure life's vicissitudes with calm and dignity. But even for them there might come a time when they would no longer wish to go on living - for example in circumstances of personal ruin or disgrace, or in the agonies of a terminal disease. In those circumstances, they believed, the rational thing to do was to end one's own life painlessly, and this many of them did. So a high proportion of the well-known Stoics ended their lives by committing suicide.

The most vivid and compelling of all the expositions of Stoicism are to be found in the writings of the later Stoics, which were all in Latin. The outstanding figures here are Seneca (c. 2 BC-AD 65) and Marcus Aurelius (AD 121-180). They were not original thinkers in the sense of adding significantly to already-existing Stoic doctrines, but they were such good writers that their works are read to this day by people who are not academics. It is to them that anyone who wants to study Stoicism at first hand should turn.

“EVERY STOIC
WAS A STOIC,
BUT IN
CHRISTENDOM,
WHERE IS THE
CHRISTIAN?”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Stoic ethics have always been widely found to be impressive and admirable, even by people who do not wholly go along with them. They are not easy to practise - but perhaps it is bound to be a characteristic of any ethics worthy of the name that they are difficult to put into practice. They had an unmistakable influence on Christian ethics, which were beginning to spread at the time when Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius were writing. And, of course, to this very day the words “stoic” and

“stoicism” are in familiar use in our language, with perhaps grudgingly admiring overtones, to mean “withstanding adversity without complaint”. There must be many people now living who - even if they have never consciously formulated this fact to themselves - subscribe to an ideal in ethics which is essentially the same as that of the Stoics.

The fact that in recent centuries the best available school education in many European countries was based on the study of Latin literature had, as one of its side-effects, that many generations of well educated European males absorbed some of the values of Stoicism. The famous “stiff upper lip” of the public-school educated Englishman was precisely an example of Stoicism in practice and in action, partly rooted in a classical education.

A WORLD-VIEW

Stoicism did not only consist of the moral philosophy with which it is now associated. Stoics made advances in logic and in theory of knowledge - indeed, they proposed a philosophy for the whole of human experience.



CHOOSING DEATH OVER LIFE

Suicide was not taboo for the Stoics. On the contrary, they believed in a man's right to determine his own death as well as his own life.