Stoic Conservatism

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Abstract: What might a Stoic approach to politics look like? David Goodhart aptly describes the political divide pervading Western societies in terms of the 'somewheres,' who are communitarian, rooted in particular places, and resistant to social and political change, versus the 'anywheres,' who are cosmopolitan, mobile, and enthusiastic embracers of change. Stoicism recognizes a similar distinction. This paper defends a conservative interpretation of Stoic politics. According to 'Stoic conservatism,' cosmopolitanism is an ethical ideal through which we perform the obligations assigned by our communitarian role(s) in society. The view is 'conservative' in that it favors existing institutions as the starting point for virtue instead of reasoning *a priori* about what virtue requires. Stoic politics consists neither in cosmopolitan transcendence of particular attachments, nor in passive acceptance of the communitarian status quo, but in ethical improvement toward virtue, *within* the political structure of society.

Keywords: communitarianism, conservatism, cosmopolitanism, politics, Stoicism, virtue.

> The administration of the great system of the universe, however, the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension; the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country: that he is occupied in contemplating the more sublime, can never be an excuse for his neglecting the more humble department.
>   Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part IV, Sec. II, Chap. III

Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Stoicism (Irvine 2008; Holiday 2014; Becker 2017; Pigliucci 2018; Whiting and Konstantakos 2021). Stoic ethics is especially popular, as people seek alternative sources of moral instruction in uncertain and divisive times. But Stoic approaches to politics are comparatively rare. This is partly because there is no scholarly consensus on what the Stoic approach to politics *is*. While most Stoics believed that the wise person will participate in politics, no positive political program clearly emerges from any of our extant sources.

What might a Stoic approach to politics look like? David Goodhart (2017) aptly describes the political divide pervading Western societies in terms of the 'somewheres,' who are communitarian, rooted in particular places, and resistant to social and political change, versus the 'anywheres,' who are cosmopolitan, mobile, and enthusiastic embracers of change. Stoicism recognizes a similar

distinction. "My city and state are Rome," Marcus Aurelius writes, "But as a human being? The world." (Aurelius 2002, VI.44) Yet the Stoics would not recognize the contemporary conflict Goodhart describes between the communitarian and cosmopolitan perspectives, as Marcus concludes that "for me, 'good' can only mean what's good for *both* communities." (Aurelius 2002, VI.44, emphasis added) So, according to Stoicism, we can (and should) be both a somewhere *and* an anywhere.

How does Stoicism reconcile cosmopolitanism and communitarianism? According to 'Stoic conservatism,' cosmopolitanism is an ethical ideal through which we perform the obligations assigned by our communitarian role(s) in society. The view is 'conservative' in the sense that there is an assumption in favor of existing institutions as the starting point for virtue, instead of reasoning *a priori* about what virtue requires. Stoic politics consists neither in cosmopolitan transcendence of particular attachments, nor in passive acceptance of the communitarian status quo, but in ethical improvement toward virtue, *within* the political structure of society. In this sense, Stoic politics is an early precursor to Edmund Burke's conservative insight that a political tradition ought to be reformed from within, according to an implicit moral standard.

While conservative characterizations of Stoicism are not uncommon, the conservative aspect of Stoic politics is often assumed to be an unmotivated result of Stoicism's radical ethical claims. I will argue that, on the contrary, conservatism fits well within Stoic ethics, as it reconciles its cosmopolitan and communitarian strands. I begin, therefore, with a presentation of Stoic ethics. Following this, I discuss the cosmopolitan and communitarian strands of Stoicism and argue for Stoic conservatism as an alternative. I argue further that Stoic conservatism finds its best expression in Cicero's adoption of Stoic natural law theory. Lastly, I suggest a novel interpretation of the 'disturbing theses' of early Stoicism (Vogt 2008), which appear flatly inconsistent with conservatism of any kind.

1. Stoic Ethics

Stoic ethics follows the ancient Greek ethical tradition in holding that *eudaimonia* (happiness) is the highest good. Implicit in Plato's dialogues and made explicit by Aristotle (2019, I.4, 1095a15-20), the thought is that happiness, understood as a good life, is what everyone desires as the highest good. While, as we will see, Aristotle's own view of happiness differs sharply from the Stoics on the question of the sufficiency of virtue for happiness, "[t]he Stoics," as A.A. Long (1996, 182) notes, "share with Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus the doctrine that happiness is essentially a condition that depends upon a person's values, beliefs, desires and moral character."

The most basic Stoic ethical teaching, dating back to Zeno's teacher Polemo, is to 'live according to nature.' (Cicero 2001, IV.14) This can alternatively mean to align one's will with the providential nature of God, or to act on the basis of what preserves human nature. The latter interpretation takes the form of an argument

from the development of human infants, who are said to "seek what is good for them and avoid the opposite before they ever feel pleasure or pain." (Cicero 2001, III.16) Like other biological organisms, what is good for us depends on our nature, so we can safely conclude that food, shelter, health, and resources are good for us. To pursue these things well is to do so in accordance with reason, which is the virtue (or excellence) specific to human beings qua rational beings. And so, to live according to (human) nature is equivalent to living according to (human) virtue, which Chrysippus, as reported by Diogenes Laertius, says "is equivalent to living according to the experience of events which occur by nature." (Inwood and Gerson 1997, D.L. 7.87)

The Stoics define 'value' (*axia*) in terms of "whatever is either itself in accordance with nature, or brings about something that is." (Cicero 2001, III.20) Living according to nature means selecting among things according to nature and rejecting those that conflict with nature. This is the beginning of ethical development. But it is not the terminus because while things in accordance with nature have 'selective value,' the Stoics argue that the activity of selecting itself has value that is truly worthy of choosing (not merely selecting). So, for instance, things like health and wealth are not truly good, while acting well in pursuit of such things – virtue – is good and valued for its own sake. It is this reflective realization that selecting well per se is of higher value than the selected things themselves that establishes the Stoic claim that virtue is the only truly choiceworthy good.

Stoicism stands out among the ancient ethical schools in holding that "virtue is sufficient for happiness," as Diogenes Laertius faithfully reports (Long and Sedley 1987, D.L. 7.127). Unlike Aristotle, who was unwilling to countenance this thesis, chalking it up to a 'philosopher's paradox,' (Aristotle 2019, 1096a) the Stoics embrace the initially counterintuitive idea that the virtuous person remains happy even under the worst circumstances. Admittedly, it can be difficult to take such a view seriously. But as usual there is more to the Stoic position than its shock value. Virtue satisfies the formal conditions for *eudaimonia* sketched by Aristotle (Annas 1993, 34-42). Human virtue is distinctive to human beings; it's within our control; we value it for its own sake, and so on. Whereas Aristotle felt the pull of common sense that led him to include external goods (e.g., honor, wealth, health, resources, etc.) in happiness alongside virtue, the Stoics avoid the possible instability of this view by restricting goodness to virtue alone (Annas 1993, chap. 18-19).

Stoicism accounts for the apparent value of external goods by assigning them to the category of 'preferred indifferents,' that is, things indifferent with respect to happiness, but worth selecting, since they are in accordance with nature. Hence, we have reason to prefer health to sickness, wealth to poverty, and so on. But it is a mistake to equate the apparent value of such things with the true value of virtue, which once attained, is unaffected by illness, poverty, and the like.

Importantly, the difference in value here is a matter of kind, not degree. *No* amount of external goods can outweigh the value of virtue.

2. Stoic Politics: Cosmopolitan, Communitarian, or Conservative?

Stoic politics stresses expanding the sphere of our moral concern beyond the self. Our concern for others begins in the family with parents' natural love for their children and ends with concern for all of human society (Cicero 2001, III.62). This is what the Stoics call social *oikeiosis*, meaning the process of adopting the interests of others as one's own on the basis of our common humanity. Like Aristotle (1998), who famously claims that "a human being is by nature a political animal," (1253a) the Stoics reason that "we are fitted by nature to form associations, assemblies and states." (Cicero 2001, III.63) Human nature is inherently social.

Hierocles, a later Greek Stoic, explains the sociality of human nature in terms of the image of concentric circles (Long and Sedley 1987, Stobaeus 4.671, 7-673, 11). The innermost circle is one's own mind, followed by one's immediate family members, extended family, local residents and neighboring townspeople, fellow citizens, and finally: "[t]he outermost and largest circle, which encompasses all the rest, is that of the whole human race." (Long and Sedley 1987, 349) According to Hierocles, moral progress consists in treating those on the outer circles as if they were members of the inner circles. Thus, you should treat a stranger like a fellow citizen, a fellow citizen like a neighbor, a neighbor or friend like a brother, and your family as if they were members of your own body. Hierocles' striking example shows the extent to which the Stoics stress the moral significance of the various social roles occupied by each person. The most important role for the Stoics, however, does not seem to be the roles that most people identify with, e.g., husband, father, citizen, and so on, but rather the role of human being as such. In this vein, Seneca writes,

> We must grasp that there are two public realms, two commonwealths. One is great and truly common to all…The other is that in which we are enrolled by an accident of birth – I mean Athens or Carthage or some other city that belongs not to all men but only to a limited number. (1995, 175)

Seneca's first commonwealth captures my role as a human being with the capacity for reason (and therefore virtue). Seneca's second commonwealth captures my role as a citizen in some existing state. How do these two roles fit together? For, following Hierocles, if I am reasoning about what virtues require of me from my role as a human being, it seems that I should show no partiality to my fellow citizens. Indeed, I should treat foreigners as if they were fellow citizens. Further, the existing laws and customs of the state in which I am a citizen may *not* be justified from the standpoint of my role as a rational human being.

This is the tension between the moral demands of Seneca's two commonwealths. Either I reason as a human being about what the virtues

rationally require of me, independently of my role as a citizen in some existing state; or I act in the role of a citizen and follow the set of existing laws and customs, ignoring my role as a rational human being. At this point, it seems as though Stoic politics must run aground, as we are forced to choose between a high-minded, but impractical cosmopolitanism, and a practical, but morally unambitious communitarianism.

Let us investigate these options more thoroughly. According to Stoic cosmopolitanism, what matters most is my role as a human being with the capacity for reason. This qualification makes all human beings equal citizens in the republic of the cosmos, which, as the opening lines of Chrysippus' *On Law* state, is governed by law:

> Law is king of all things human and divine. Law must preside over what is honourable and base, as ruler and as guide, and thus be the standard of right and wrong, prescribing to animals whose nature is political what they should do, and prohibiting them from what they should not do. (Long and Sedley 1987, *SVF* 3.314)

Insofar as Chrysippus expresses a moral conception of law, articulating the directive nature of virtue, rather than a set of explicit laws, Stoic cosmopolitanism appears to have no clear political implications.[1] We should treat others equally, making no special distinction between citizen and foreigner. But practical politics has no genuine connection to the demands of virtue. So, unless the existing law of a state flagrantly violates the moral law, positive law has no bearing on virtuous action. It merely sanctions what we already have a moral obligation (not) to do anyway, e.g., positive laws against murder. Ironically, of course, cosmopolitanism and natural law are among the Stoic innovations that were most influential on later developments in Western political philosophy (see e.g., Hill and Blazejak 2021). But on their own, within Stoic ethics, they appear politically inert.

Later thinkers emphasize Stoicism's communitarian elements. Epictetus, for instance, combines Stoic cosmopolitanism with the Stoic doctrine of divine providence to argue that being a citizen of the world requires that we recognize our communitarian role(s) as parts of the cosmos as a whole:

> Consider who you are. First, a Man...On these terms you are a citizen of the universe and a part of it...What then is the calling of a Citizen? To have no personal interest, never to think about anything as though he were detached, but to be like the hand or the foot, which, if they had the power of reason and understood the order of nature, would direct every impulse and every process of the will by reference to the whole. (Epictetus 2004, II.10)

To be a good citizen of the universe, then, is to play one's assigned role. And since we cannot know the ultimate direction of nature, Epictetus concludes, "it is appropriate that we should hold fast to the things that are by nature more fit to be

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[1] Annas (1993, 311) ascribes to the early Stoics "a radically unpolitical, even depoliticized [outlook]."

chosen; for indeed we are born for this." (2004, II.10.) Epictetus' thought is, just as I cannot be a good man without also being a good son, so too I cannot be a good cosmopolitan without attending to my assigned role(s) in the cosmos.

According to Epictetus, communitarianism is required (not merely permitted) by Stoic cosmopolitanism. Stoic politics integrates the existing political structure of society into its conception of the cosmos. A Stoic lives in accordance with nature by selecting appropriate actions that derive from one's existing role(s) in society. While unlike Stoic cosmopolitanism, Stoic communitarianism undoubtedly has political content, it is difficult to see how it moves us beyond the status quo. Stoic ethics stresses the importance of justice as a character virtue. But as Julia Annas (1993, 311) observes, "the Stoics have no systematic answer to the question, how justice as a virtue of the individual agent relates to justice as a virtue of institutions." Hence, justice, according to Stoic communitarianism, seems to require only that I perform my role(s) within the existing institutions of society without questioning whether the institutions that define my role are *just*. Stoic communitarianism yields an equally unsatisfying account of Stoic politics.

Is there a middle way? According to what I call 'Stoic conservatism,' a Stoic approach to politics should prioritize neither cosmopolitanism nor communitarianism. A Stoic should strive for virtue within the socially embedded context of the role(s) defined by the existing institutions of society.[2] So, for instance, if I am a police officer, I should try to be a *just* police officer. If I am a father, I should try to be a *loving* father. If I am an American citizen, I should try to be a *good* American citizen. Stoic cosmopolitanism has no political content because it is intended as an ethical (not political) ideal, while Stoic communitarianism appears politically quietist only when detached from the Stoic ethical ideal. Stoic conservatism reconciles cosmopolitanism and communitarianism by insisting that ethical development toward virtue begin with the performance of actions associated with existing social roles. But Stoic conservatism also insists that the demands of social roles cannot be fulfilled unreflectively, since they must be integrated into the ethical ideal of virtue as a whole.

Conservative characterizations of Stoicism are not uncommon. Annas (1993, 309), for instance, in a discussion of the relationship between the Stoic ethical ideal and the tendency of Stoics to accept conventional political institutions like private property, writes regretfully that "in general Stoic discussions on this level seem to be basically conservative." If we expect Stoicism to produce a theory of justice that pronounces critically on the existing political organization of society, this must come as a disappointing realization. But though Stoicism is a very demanding moral theory, the Stoics never detach the ethical ideal of the virtuous life from the practical reality of the person striving to live such a life.

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[2] I am much indebted to Annas (2002, 2007), who defends this view as an interpretation of Stoic ethics, but notably does not explore its political implications.

Cicero, for instance, reports that, according to Stoicism, "it is consistent with human nature for the wise person to want to take part in the business of government, and, in living by nature, to take a spouse and to wish to have children." (Cicero 2001, III.68) Epictetus, in contrast, invokes Socrates' refusal to commit unjust acts even when this conflicted with his conventional social roles (Epictetus 2004, II.1). But, according to Stoic conservatism, Cicero and Epictetus are both right. We should neither give up on conventional social roles, nor fulfill them unreflectively, isolated from the demands of virtue. "No one," Cicero reminds his son in *De Officiis*, "should be misled into thinking that because Socrates and Aristippus acted or spoke against the established custom of the city, we can do the same." (Cicero 2000, I.148) But equally so, "[m]ost foolish of all is the belief that everything decreed by the institutions or laws of a particular country is just." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* I.42)

How is this middle way to virtue achieved? Cicero, perhaps through the influence of the middle Stoic Panaetius, outlines four 'personae' or roles that characterize the virtuous agent.[3] The first two roles have to do with human nature, both collective and individual: "[1] The first is that which all of us share by virtue of our participation in that reason and superiority by which we rise above the brute beasts… [2] The other is that which is assigned uniquely to each individual," (Cicero 2000, I.107) i.e., a person's peculiar psychological and physical characteristics. The third and fourth roles have to do with chance circumstances and our choices: "[3] Regal powers, kingships, military commands, noble birth, magistracies, riches, resources – and the opposites of these – are a matter of chance, depending on circumstances." (Cicero 2000, I.115) Finally, "[4] the role which we should like to play is prompted by our own choice," (Cicero 2000, I.115) e.g., the choice of a vocation, spouse, or pastime.

Cicero urges that, in determining what virtue requires of us, "we must mentally grasp and reflect on all these aspects." (Cicero 2000, I.117) In other words, the virtuous person must harmonize all four roles, not reason in isolation from the demands of existing social roles, nor fulfill such roles unreflectively. For, our ability to reason alone is seldom sufficient to work out what must be done in particular circumstances; we need the constraints of existing institutions. Neither should chance opportunities be accepted unreflectively, since not everyone is fit to rule or make wise use of riches or resources. Likewise, the roles that we would like to play (e.g., a musician) are very often justly constrained by the roles of circumstance (e.g., the need to make a living), or a role we have already chosen (e.g., husband and father).

Cicero's theory of the four personae supports Stoic conservatism by including all four roles in working out what the virtues demand. Cicero maintains that from the first role "the honourable and fitting elements *wholly* derive, and

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[3] For the influence of Panaetius on Cicero's theory, see De Lacy (1977). For a recent treatment of role ethics in Epictetus and Cicero see Brian E. Johnson (2016, chap. 8).

from it too the way in which we assess our obligations." (2000, I.107, emphasis added) But because of the relative standing of the other three roles, this cannot be done by setting aside existing obligations and working out independently what is honorable and fitting. Rather, the leading role of rational human being must be played *through* the supporting roles of who you are, your existing relationships, and your choices.

3. Stoic Conservatism in Cicero's Natural Law Theory

Stoic conservatism finds its best expression in Cicero's adoption of Stoic natural law theory. Although it has antecedents in both Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics are usually credited with innovating natural law theory. Whereas prior philosophers had set nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*) in opposition, the Stoics locate true law (*nomos*) in nature herself. Cicero's contribution was to bring natural law down from heaven, as it were, and introduce it into cities as a way of doing the political philosophy neglected by the early Stoics.[4]

Cicero's *De Republica* is concerned with the question of the best regime and the possibility that philosophy and statesmanship might coincide to realize such a regime. In the words of Cicero's character Scipio, "a republic is the property of the public...brought together by legal consent and community of interest." (Cicero 1998, I.39) Given Cicero's rejection of legal conventionalism (see *De Leg.* I.42), and his observation that with regard to justice "a thousand changes have taken place within a single city," (*Rep.* III.17) a *good* republic must have just laws. To this end, Cicero avails himself of the Stoic concept of natural law as a normative standard to evaluate political regimes. Accordingly, Cicero pronounces that "[t]here will not be one such law in Rome and another in Athens, one now and another in the future, but all peoples at all times will be embraced by a single and eternal and unchangeable law." (*Rep.*, III.33)

A more detailed account of Stoic natural law theory can be found in Cicero's *De Legibus*. Echoing Chrysippus, Cicero identifies law with "the highest reason, inherent in nature, which enjoins what ought to be done and forbids the opposite." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* I.18) We act virtuously when we act in accordance with reason, which is equivalent, for the Stoics, to nature, since law governs both impersonal nature and human affairs. This is a conception of law far removed from positive or written law; indeed, natural law precedes written law and enjoins legislation that enables human beings to attain the virtues. Cicero argues that the purpose of law, then, must be "to ensure the safety of citizens, the security of states, and the peaceful happy life of human beings." (Cicero 1998, *De Leg.* II.11) Laws that do this well are good imitations of natural law, by which we judge positive laws to be just or unjust.

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[4] In this sense, Cicero did for Stoicism what he says Socrates did for philosophy generally. See Cicero (2012, V.10).

What makes Cicero's natural law theory *conservative* is his acknowledgment that, given the imperfections in human nature, the content of natural law is not fully accessible to human reason, nor can human beings be relied upon to steadily observe the natural law without the constraining role of institutions (Cicero 2000, *De Off.* III.69). This means that, while, in theory, a monarchy administered by a perfectly wise person is the best regime, in practice, given the tendency of the pure simple regimes (i.e., monarchy, oligarchy, and democracy) to degenerate into cycles of stasis, Cicero favors "a carefully proportioned mixture of the first three [simple regimes]" to maintain the civic bond, thus forestalling civic strife.[5] (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* I.45)

What makes Cicero's defense of the mixed constitution conservative is his argument that the mixed constitution of the Roman Republic was the best living embodiment of natural law. Scipio finds the best regime in "the one which our fathers received from their forebears and have handed down to us," that is, the Roman Republic of the recent past (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* 1.70; see also I.34). After a tour through Roman history, illustrating Rome's gradual incorporation of monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic institutions, Scipio justifies using Rome as a normative model on the grounds of "illustrating, from the actual experience of the greatest state, what was being described in my theoretical exposition." (Cicero 1998, *Rep.* II.66) Whereas Plato had attempted to construct the just city 'in speech,' Cicero looks to the past as a living embodiment and approximation of the universal natural law. In this way, Cicero embraces what conservatives call 'the wisdom of tradition,' in recognizing that the Roman constitution "had been established not by one man's ability but by that of many, not in the course of one man's life but over several ages and generations." (1998, *Rep.* II.2)

There are two distinctive features of Cicero's treatment of natural law in its relation to the best regime.[6] First, unlike Plato and Aristotle, who construct their political theories on the model of the Greek polis, Cicero's invocation of Stoic natural law includes the entire human community, and as such, in principle, applies to all human societies at all times. Second, Cicero avoids the depoliticized outlook of early Stoic cosmopolitanism by locating the best approximation of natural law in the institutions of the Roman Republic. In this sense, natural law retains its universality, yet finds its best realization in the particular laws of the Roman Republic.

Annas (2017, 180-186) identifies a problem here. How can the particular laws of Republican Rome have universal application? In his account of natural law, Cicero describes a system of law that is universal, derived from nature, not custom or convention. But when the details of what natural law requires of the best regime, Cicero falls back on a slightly modified version of the Roman Republic.

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[5] A mixed constitution was also considered the best form of government by the Stoics, though the report from Diogenes Laertius is unmotivated and lacks context (Inwood and Gerson 1997, D.L. 7.131).

[6] I follow here Annas (2017, 179-180).

Could Cicero really be claiming that the Roman Republic of the recent past is the best regime everywhere, so that it ought to be implemented in every society? And could the Roman Republic – with all of its haphazard advances and setbacks – really have perfected the content of natural law that exists in the moral fabric of the universe?

To resolve this problem, we must first understand that natural law, for Cicero, following the Stoics, is not a set of specific laws, but rather the directive sense of virtue.[7] Natural law has the universal function of promoting human happiness through the virtues. But given the limits of human nature, as well as the vagaries of chance and circumstance, the good statesman must take into account the particulars when applying the natural law to an existing society. As we have seen, for Cicero, this requires a blend of the simple regimes into a mixed constitution, whose particular laws best *imitate* the universal natural law. From his own (admittedly biased) experience, Cicero held that the Roman Republic was the best existing imitation of natural law, and as such, was the best possible (since existing) regime. And who could blame him? But this does not mean that the Roman Republic is the best possible regime *everywhere*, for that would ignore the important differences among societies, and neither does it mean that the content of the universal natural law is *identical* to the particular laws of the Roman Republic, since Rome is only the best existing imitation of natural law, not a facsimile.

Cicero's conception of natural law as conforming to the demands of virtue follows early Stoic cosmopolitanism. But Cicero, in his philosophical eclecticism, also develops natural law in a genuinely political direction that goes beyond early Stoicism. In doing so, Cicero reconciles Stoic cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. Cicero embraces Stoic conservatism. The good statesman looks to the best regime, not as a utopian blueprint for existing states, but rather as an ideal of natural law (and so virtue) *through which* the reform of an existing society is possible.

4. Stoic Conservatism and the 'Disturbing Theses' of Early Stoicism

Stoic conservatism, as I have described it, fits well with middle and later Stoicism, particularly the Roman Stoics, who were much more conscious of and interested in politics.[8] But what about the early Greek Stoics? Since none of the primary texts have survived intact, we have to rely on testimony and doxography, much of which appears to be flatly incompatible with conservatism of any kind. These are what Katja Maria Vogt (2008) calls the 'disturbing theses' of early Stoicism. The most

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[7] Again, I follow Annas (2017, 180-186), though she does not identify this resolution of the problem as 'conservative.'
[8] The development of Stoic political thought related to the question of the best regime is discussed in Devine (1970).

famous of these come from the work by Zeno of Citium known as the *Republic*.[9] Our best source is Diogenes Laertius, who reports its contents from criticisms made by Cassius the Sceptic:

> Some people, including the circle of Cassius the Sceptic, criticize Zeno extensively: [1] first, for declaring at the beginning of his *Republic* that the educational curriculum is useless; [2] and secondly, for his statement that all who are not virtuous are foes, enemies, slaves and estranged from one another, including parents and children, brothers and brothers, relations and relations. [3] They criticize him again for presenting only virtuous people in the *Republic* as citizens, friends, relations and free…and [4] for his doctrine set out there concerning community of wives, and [5] his prohibition at line 200 against the building of temples, lawcourts and gymnasia in cities. [6] They also take exception to his statement on currency: 'The provision of currency should not be thought necessary either for exchange or for travel,' and [7] for his instruction that men and women should wear the same clothes and keep no part of the body completely covered. (Long and Sedley 1987, D.L. 7.32-3)

Some of these reported claims are more anti-conservative than others. Claims (1), (4), (5), (6), and (7) are thoroughly subversive of longstanding social institutions and customs traditionally supported by conservatives, while arguably claims (2) and (3) are mere dramatic statements of the demandingness of Stoic ethical theory. But taken at face value, it is difficult to reconcile any of these claims with Stoic conservatism as I have described it.

Given that Stoicism developed over many hundreds of years, and the context for these controversial claims is unclear and presented by critics hostile to Stoicism, it would not be entirely unreasonable to set them aside. "However," as Vogt (2008, 20-21) argues, "the testimony on these theses – which I call the disturbing theses – plays such a central role in what we know about early Stoic political philosophy that one must either neglect this field or engage with them." Clearly, then, if Stoic conservatism is plausible as a coherent Stoic approach to politics, we must engage with the disturbing theses, even if, given scant sources, we do so speculatively.

Malcolm Schofield (1991, 22-25) distinguishes three possible interpretations from Diogenes Laertius' report of Zeno's *Republic*. First, according to *antinomianism*, "No positive political ideal emerges or is intended to emerge. The spirit of Zeno's recommendations is altogether critical and antinomian." (Schofield 1991, 22) Second, according to *revisionism*, "Zeno does indicate a positive ideal: a community of sages. But it represents a radically revised conception of community." (Schofield 1991, 22) Third, according to *communism*, "The ideal is a community as ordinarily conceived…[but] What makes Zeno's community ideal is the degree of concord achieved in it through the political virtue

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[9] Though similar issues are raised by a work of the same name by Zeno's successor, Chrysippus, for reasons of space, I do not discuss the claims associated with Chrysippus' work.

of its citizens, which is in turn fostered by communist political institutions." (Schofield 1991, 22)

Schofield's catalog of interpretations breaks down along two axes. First, are the proposals of Zeno's *Republic* intended as political proposals? Second, are the proposals intended positively, i.e., should be put into practice, or are they merely critical, i.e., of conventional social arrangements? According to antinomianism, Zeno's proposals in the *Republic* are neither political, nor to be taken seriously as positive proposals, as they are merely intended to ridicule and critique the conventional status of existing social arrangements. The antinomian interpretation is supported by early Stoicism's association with Cynicism through Zeno's teacher Crates.[10] This interpretation is perhaps least compatible with Stoic conservatism, and indeed, with later Stoicism as it eventually distanced itself from Cynicism.[11]

Schofield's second interpretation, revisionism, shares the non-political stance of antinomianism, but offers a positive moral ideal in place of antinomianism's critical stance toward conventional social arrangements. This interpretation fits well with Stoic cosmopolitanism in its emphasis on the cosmic city of sages. According to Vogt (2008, 56-64), Zeno's provocative anti-institutional claims are intended to stress the conventional status of institutions like courthouses, whose parochial activities should not be confused with the universal demands of the cosmic city. So, for instance, in the city of sages, in which everyone is virtuous, understood as perfectly following natural law, courthouses are otiose. If confined to Stoic ethics, the revisionist reading is compatible with Stoic conservatism. But because it deliberately abstracts from institutions like courthouses, gymnasia, schools, and so on, it tells us little about the Stoic approach to politics and is therefore unhelpful for our purposes.

Schofield himself endorses the communist reading, according to which Zeno's proposals are both political and positively intended.[12] Schofield (1991, 25) argues that "as with Plato, so in Zeno the objective is conceived not in terms of the ethics of the individual, but constitutes a specifically *political* ideal." (emphasis added) Indeed, Zeno's *Republic* shares with Plato's *Republic* several specific political proposals including the community of women. There is also a report from Plutarch that Zeno "wrote in reply to Plato's *Republic.*" (quoted in Schofield 1991, 25) Plainly, the communist reading of Zeno's *Republic* is incompatible with Stoic conservatism, since it offers a utopian vision of the just society in place of cautious reform from within an existing society.

Is there a conservative alternative to the antinomian, revisionist, and communist interpretations of Zeno's *Republic*? One intriguing possibility is to

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[10] Schofield locates this interpretation in Finley (1975, 188).

[11] Cicero (2000, I.128, I.148) is particularly harsh on the Cynics for their lack of shame and social propriety, which, for Cicero, goes against human nature and is anyhow incompatible with public life.

[12] Schofield credits "the best statement of this interpretation" to Baldry (1959).

follow Schofield in adopting the political reading, but deny that Zeno's proposals are positively intended. According to this reading, the political proposals of Zeno's *Republic* are intended *critically*, that is, they illustrate the impossibility (and folly) of trying to practically realize communism in an actual society. Although it is controversial, some have defended this reading of Plato's *Republic* (Strauss 1964, chap. II; Bloom 1968, 389-411; see also Ferrari 1997). So we need not give up on Schofield's plausible premise that Zeno follows Plato's *Republic*. But, as Brad Inwood (1992, 5) notes, "[i]n so far as Schofield relies on the argument that Zeno wrote the *Republic* with Plato's dialogue in view … he has succeeded only in pushing the problem back one step further. For we must then puzzle out, rather than assume, the correct reading of Plato's *Republic*."

This is not the place to settle the correct reading of Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, given its complexity, no reading is without controversy. But a common reading of the dialogue is that it uses the political proposals of the just city as an ethical model for showing the superiority of the virtuous life, even in unjust circumstances like those vividly demonstrated by Socrates' own life (see e.g., Annas 1981). Thus, at the end of Book IX, Socrates says that the just person will "look to the constitution within him and guard against disturbing anything in it," and "won't be willing to take part in politics," except "in his own kind of city. But he may not be willing to do so in his fatherland, unless some divine good luck chances to be his." (Plato 1997, 592a) This sounds very much like Zeno's claim that only the virtuous are truly citizens. The ethical reading of Plato's *Republic* corresponds to the revisionist reading of Zeno's *Republic* discussed above. But, in fact, revisionism is compatible with the conservative reading I propose. For, if the cosmic city is an ethical ideal against which actual human beings inevitably fall short, then it is highly imprudent to treat the characteristics of the cosmic city as a politically realizable goal. Rather, the ethical ideal of the cosmic city is a prescriptive ideal against which ethical progress may be measured. As Marcus reminds himself, "don't go expecting Plato's Republic; be satisfied with even the smallest progress…The task of philosophy is modest and straightforward. Don't tempt me to presumption." (Aurelius 2002, IX.29)

Further support for the conservative reading of Zeno's *Republic* vis-à-vis Plato's *Republic* comes from Cicero, who in a stray comment from his own *Republic*, notes that "[Plato] constructed a state which was desirable rather than feasible. It was the smallest he could contrive, and, though not actually possible, it enabled the reader to see how politics worked." (Cicero 1998, II.52) How does the impossibility of Plato's state show the reader how politics works? Cicero does not elaborate. But presumably, Cicero is referring to the reasons why Plato's just city was not possible, after all, because it conflicts with our natural desires for, and attachments to religion, nation, family, property, tradition, and custom. This conservative argument against political utopianism plausibly casts into doubt Socrates' radical political proposals in the *Republic*, which Aristotle (1998, II.1-5) notably critiques, as inconsistent with human nature, as well as Socrates'

deliberatively provocative claim that the just city's feasibility is premised on the philosopher-kings coming to rule. More fundamentally for our purposes, the political reading of Plato's *Republic* ignores the lesson of Stoic conservatism, a lesson that Cicero, as we have seen, evidently embraces: political philosophy begins in the society in which we find ourselves, and proceeds by the maintenance and reform of existing institutions according to the ideals of natural law and virtue, subject to the constraints of prudence.

Stoic conservatism also fits with Cicero's understanding of the early Stoics, who, according to Cicero, did not engage in practical political philosophy. In a discussion from *De Legibus* on the practical issue of magistrates, Cicero (1998, III.13) alludes to "points examined first by Theophrastus and then, in greater detail, by Diogenes [of Babylon] the Stoic."[13] His friend Atticus then responds with surprise: "Really? Such matters were also handled by the Stoics?" (Cicero 1998, III.13) Cicero goes on to clarify that he is referring to more recent Stoics like Diogenes and Panaetius, whereas "[t]he older Stoics supplied perceptive *theoretical* discussions of the state, but did not offer, as I [Cicero] am doing, a *practical* guide for communities of citizens." (1998, *De Leg.* III.14, emphasis added) According to Cicero, then, the older Stoics like Zeno *were* following in the footsteps of Plato's *Republic*, as Schofield suggests. However, they did so not in the manner of putting forth serious political proposals, but rather by exploring the nature of politics theoretically in relation to the ethical ideal of virtue.

What, then, should we make of the proposals of Zeno's *Republic*? The proposals with parallels in Plato's *Republic* can be read as bringing Plato's proposals to their logical conclusion. So, in the truly just city, *everyone* must be fully virtuous, not just the rulers, since any injustice in the soul has the potential to generate social conflict that could undermine the city's unity. But if everyone is *already* virtuous in the just city, then the extensive educational program of Plato's *Republic* really is 'useless.' Similarly, if the just city represents an ideal of friendship, then whoever is not fully virtuous must be an enemy to such a city. What about the proposals to abolish established institutions like marriage, temples, lawcourts, and gymnasia? These institutions regulate love, piety, justice, and physical health respectively. But none of these institutions would be necessary in the cosmic city. Zeno's point, therefore, might be simply that *this* is what a society of truly virtuous people would look like. In other words, it would not look like a human society in any recognizable sense. As such, it is certainly not to be taken as a serious political proposal.

Schofield (1991, 148) himself considers a version of our hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, Zeno intended his *Republic* as an impossible utopia. So, according to Philodemus, "[Zeno's] legislation consisted of impossible hypotheses for people who don't exist – disregarding those who do." (quoted in

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[13] This is the same Diogenes who Cicero (2000, III.50-57, 91-92) reports had a disagreement with fellow Stoic Antipater of Tarsus about whether one must disclose defects in a house put up for sale. See Annas (1989). See also Obbink and Vander Waerdt (1991).

Schofield 1991, 147) And once we remind ourselves of the well-known Stoic claim that the wise person is as rare as the Ethiopian phoenix, it becomes clear that the political proposals of Zeno's *Republic* were not intended seriously. Schofield rejects this hypothesis on the basis of Zeno's apparent intention to make good on the practical impossibility of Plato's *Republic*: "Zeno is saying: the community described in *my Republic*, unlike the one in Plato's, is achievable *both* here *and* in the present."[14] (Schofield 1991, 148, emphasis original)

Schofield's claim is plausible if understood as part of the revisionist (or ethical) reading of Zeno's *Republic*. After all, Philodemus also reports that Zeno offered "something applicable to the places in which he found himself and the times in which he lived." (quoted in Schofield 1991, 148) And as Schofield stresses, ethically speaking, "[a]ll that is necessary for the realization of Zeno's vision is that people begin to exercise their capacity for virtue." (1991, 149) But given that virtue cannot be summoned by abstracting from the social contexts in which it develops, is it true that this would be sufficient to practically realize the *political* proposals of Zeno's vision? Schofield casts Zeno's *Republic* as *anti*-utopian in the sense that, unlike Plato, "his [Zeno's] book gave his readers something much more directly applicable to their lives." (1991, 50-1). But it is hard to see how instructing not-yet-virtuous people to abolish the central institutions of their society is a way of making the ethical ideal of virtue 'directly applicable to their lives.' Indeed, this only makes sense on the utopian assumption that everyone could become fully virtuous. Instead, as I've argued, it is more plausible to interpret Zeno's *Republic* as an anti-utopian warning *against* this very misconception. The alternative, following Stoic conservatism, is to work toward the ideal of virtue within the socially embedded contexts of your own life, including the political structure of your society.

5. Conclusion

I began by observing that the recent popularity of Stoic ethics has not produced a coherent Stoic approach to politics. For, the Stoics either seem to recommend a radically depoliticized cosmopolitanism, or the political quietism of communitarianism. Neither responds to the contemporary interest in social justice as a normative vision of what a just society would be like that would, in turn, offer practical guidance for political change. Stoic conservatism, inasmuch as it recommends that we refocus our attention on the ideal of virtue rather than the ideal society, shares this feature of Stoic cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. But Stoic conservatism, like Stoic ethics, does offer practical guidance for working toward political reforms that better enable citizens to develop the virtues. We can improve in virtue *and* better society, through the existing institutions of society, not by discarding them in vain pursuit of utopia.

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[14] Schofield also argues that the Stoic claim about the rarity of the sage is a later development in response to a similar claim by Epicureans.

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