

# Stoic Primitivism

Jane Kingsley  
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The idea that primitive peoples, either in earlier times or distant places, lead somehow better lives closer to nature has captured Western imagination since antiquity. Originating in the accounts of a primordial paradise of perfect happiness and abundance – and a profound nostalgia to recover it – that have found a place in major religions, it has been a recurrent theme in art and literature. It came to the ancient Greeks, around 700BC, by Hesiod's stories in *Works and Days* of a 'Golden Race' of primitive happy people that, like the gods, lived 'with hearts free from sorrow and remote from toil and grief'<sup>1</sup> in a perfect relationship with nature. It has been claimed that the Stoics, like many Greek and Roman poets and philosophers, were infected with these ideas and from them comes strand of primitivism that has influenced European thinking through to Jean-Jacques Rousseau and beyond.<sup>2</sup> It is unlike the Stoics though to lament a lost world: their philosophy is essentially forward looking and practical. This paper looks at primitivism and Stoic ideas of nature and discusses whether and to what extent they can in fact be considered primitivist.

## ***Primitivism***

'Primitivism' has had a number of different but related expressions that often blend confusingly but can broadly be simplified around four sets of ideas. There is chronological primitivism whose adherents understand the story of history as one of decline from the happy condition of earliest people. Descent has either been sudden, after a fall from some sort of 'golden age', or a gradual deterioration in goodness or happiness over time. Some believe a renewal of man's primeval goodness is possible at some time at least for a while but in general this is a backward looking, pessimistic mode of thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur O Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins Press, 1997), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Roche, *Rousseau, Stoic and Romantic* (London: Methuen, 1974).

Cultural primitivism also holds that the ideal human life is a 'natural' one, unspoiled by societal and technological development. It can look for a model for human happiness among geographically distant primitive peoples of the present or from the past. Or it can say that even earliest humans were tainted by human institutions and only animals live contented lives – we should live as they do. Similar to, and often merging with, the chronological account, it stems from a concern with how humans live a good life rather than thoughts about the progress of mankind in history. Not believing the pattern of events in time to be inevitable, it proposes more desirable ways of living or coping with life so tends to be more optimistic.

In chronological, cultural and merged forms of primitivism, there is a 'soft' version holding that primitives lead easy lives of leisure and freedom from civilized society's conventions and inhibitions; and a seemingly contradictory 'hard' version that sees the primitive life as one of physical hardship and poverty. In both cases the simple life without human artifice is a happier one. The soft version holds that nature is bountiful and kind, the climate is usually warm and no-one needs to work – until technological advances bring with the ability to produce goods the necessity for all to labour miserably in their production. It also holds that primitive social structures are free of the restrictive rules and regulations citizens of more advanced societies endure. Such soft, chronological primitivism is exemplified in the myths of the Golden Age. In 'hard' primitivism, where nature can be harsh and cruel, primitive life is hard, and humans are subject to disease and predation by other animals, people not only know how to live cheerfully without the superfluous luxuries of more advanced societies, but they live better happier lives because they do not desire these things. They have developed virtues such as independence, self-reliance and courage.

## *Life According to Nature*

A form of hard cultural primitivism can possibly be seen in Stoic belief that life should be lived in accordance with nature: Diogenes Laertes tells us that Zeno said in his first book, *On the Nature of Man*, that 'the goal was to live in agreement with nature, which is to live according to virtue. For nature leads us to virtue'.<sup>3</sup> But because of the problems inherent in doxography and translation, and the multiple, often conflicting, understandings of the word 'nature', even in ancient times this statement was a far from simple one and needs some examination. The context of the philosophy in which the phrase is understood also modifies its meaning.

At first 'according to nature' suggests according to one's natural inclination or desire. But looking at this belief in Cynicism where it emerges, it was held along with a connected idea of 'indifference to all that is external to the individual'. This self-sufficiency and indifference to things outside oneself – such as material goods or people – meant that one would not desire these things. Acting according to desires then would be acting according to 'internal' ones that the Cynics deemed natural to humans: that is those that are 'primary, universal, instinctive and irrepressible, spontaneous' and known to be natural because 'they can easily and equally be gratified by all men'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, indulgence of these natural impulses was to be encouraged – especially where they are normally repressed or disapproved of in civilized society – as a rejection of refinements, conventions and courtesies that are the 'unnatural' additions of human culture. Thus Diogenes the Cynic was well known for acting according to his natural but antisocial impulses in public. 'External' desires, to obtain unnecessary things and pleasure - those resulting from, or instigating, artistic or technological progress - were to be rejected.

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<sup>3</sup> See Diogenes Laertes 7. 84-131 in Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, p. 120.

For the Cynics nature was 'anything uncontaminated by art' and characteristic of the primeval age that was assumed to be pre-civilized and pre-art and science. Although life was hard for early man, physically, without the comfort and assistance brought by technology and the arts, happiness is not a matter of physical circumstances. On the contrary, the hard life of primitive people, if lived according to nature, could be happier because there would be no confusion between happiness and pleasure.<sup>5</sup> Cynics, though, did not withdraw from society to inhabit rural surroundings of plants and animals, but moved and preached their doctrine in the midst of civilization. A good life was a matter of practice, not circumstance; and a life in agreement with nature was understood as a way of finding freedom and happiness as an individual, regardless of environment.

Zeno, founder of Stoicism, was a pupil of Crates – a Cynic. And Epictetus, 'traditionally described as the principal Roman expositor of the Stoics', quoted Diogenes the Cynic more often than he did the Stoics themselves.<sup>6</sup> So the fundamental principles of Cynicism and the "fusion of the Socratic ideal of self-sufficiency with the maxim of 'conformity to nature'" were held also by the Stoics.<sup>7</sup> Zeno and Cleanthes, at least, apparently emulated the coarse behaviour of the Cynics<sup>8</sup>. Later the more antisocial habits were dropped and understandings of nature and how to live in accordance with it evolved and changed. As far as can be understood from surviving texts, it began to be perceived more as the cosmic order of things, as universal nature, rather than human nature.

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<sup>5</sup> G R Boys-Stones, *Post Hellenistic Philosophy: A Study of its Development from the Stoics to Origen* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Lovejoy and Boas p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Lovejoy and Boas p. 261.

<sup>8</sup> Lovejoy and Boas p. 260.

The Stoics had a concept of 'natural' law<sup>9</sup> that was independent of human legislation but provided universal and unchanging standards by which human rules and regulations could be evaluated. Because the harmony and order of nature are organised by divine reason, they argued, its rules must be perceived as the laws of a divine legislator. And further: its goodness, its perfect rational order, is the only thing that can be called good without qualification. The human good life, a life of virtue, then, being the life of a rational creature, must be one that is lived in accordance with the perfect order of the universe – or 'according to nature'.<sup>10</sup>

Human natural impulses to be acted on are those that concord with this natural order. Chrysippus argued that following impulses to self-preservation and sociability, that is pursuing those things necessary for our own survival, and caring for our family and the welfare of other human beings, will 'result in a regular and orderly pattern of conduct that will exhibit the kind of harmony that accounts for the goodness of the universe as a whole'.

It is worth noting that if the harmony and order of the universe is today attributed to natural selection rather than Providence, we can understand how animals following such impulses in the wild remain in harmony with the rest of their environment. This would also be true for humans, although the natural order would only persist until upset by the introduction of technology. Nature in a social species such as ours has selected for (correctly: not selected against) those patterns of behaviour that enable us to live healthily to reproduce successfully – such as looking after our own survival, caring for young and co-operating with others. It can surely be argued then that people acting on such impulses are acting in accordance with natural law. I come back to the

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<sup>9</sup> Though the concept itself may go back to older conceptions of natural justice: see Gisela Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 209-220.

<sup>10</sup> Striker, pp. 217-8.

natural relationship between helping oneself and helping others later, but first I want to look at whether Stoics would consider such a life in response to impulse a happy one.

For many cultural primitivists this pre-civilized life would be ideally happy and some even think that animals' lives are happier than ours. But this is where Stoic primitivism, if it is primitivism, differs from other forms: their answer would be 'no'. Their argument is complicated but it is clear that they did not advocate acting simply in response to natural desire. Where children, or other non-rational creatures (children being considered pre-rational), act on impulse for self-preservation this is not acting in agreement with nature: it is 'behaving naturally'. But a human being grows up to become rational and comes to understand, rationally, the rational harmony and order of the universe. She then understands, though Stoic argument becomes vague here, 'what really deserves to be called good'.<sup>11</sup> Acting in accordance with this harmonious and orderly cosmos is then acting in agreement with nature, which is to live a good life. This it seems one must rationally and positively opt to do, a goal one should pursue. To return to the Chrysippus quote about following impulses, given above, the human adult must consciously, rather than reflexively, follow these impulses as she recognises them as impulses to be followed, and this is acting in agreement with nature rather than acting naturally. And the reason she should do this, the goal or end to be pursued, is *eudaimonia*, which can be translated as happiness, a good soul or a good life. Therefore it is only in harmony with nature that happiness can be achieved. We should note though this it is not possession of natural things but, 'the reasonable selection of natural things' that is the goal. To the things attained we must be indifferent.

It seems then that we have moved some way away from the Cynic conception of behaving according to natural desires. Acting in harmony with nature for the Stoics is, conversely, learned

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<sup>11</sup> Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* 3.21 quoted in Striker, p. 225.

and subject to reason. It is a cultured thing. Furthermore their doctrine allows them to select not only in the interests of health, strength and intelligence as these are needed for self-preservation, but also the means to acquire these, such as wealth and reputation<sup>12</sup>. This is hardly the primitivism of the Cynics, who explicitly rejected desires to obtain unnecessary things and those resulting from, or instigating, artistic or technological progress.

Are the Stoics guilty of massaging the concept of nature to suit their own ends? Although of course such massaging could itself be considered a natural tendency – as Epictetus says, ‘it is natural for man, as to other creatures, to do everything for his own sake’ - it is difficult to see how a flexible concept of natural actions can offer a standard for the conduct of life.<sup>13</sup> The pursuit of wealth and reputation, even if these can be construed as part of a natural interest in self-preservation, must often come in conflict with caring for others, for instance, another natural impulse. The Stoic answer given by Epictetus is that for Stoics they are not in conflict: that if a person does something for her own sake, that is good for herself, she will do good for the community. Her goal is not wealth and reputation for themselves: to these she is indifferent. It is the will, according to Epictetus, that is important. If she is acting for her own good, that is for the good of her soul, rather than for money or advancement for their own sakes, one can see that it is possible for a person to pursue here own health, strength and intelligence in a way that can be of benefit to the community. Similarly cooperative behaviour, looking after the interest of others, can be in the interest of the individual. A good deal of cooperative behaviour has been observed in other social species. And in our own species it has been argued that it is only due to our

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<sup>12</sup> Striker, p. 240.

<sup>13</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.19.

cooperative behaviour that humans have survived at all.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that such social behaviour would work in the interest of each individual in the community.

This is not a wholly satisfactory answer to the problem of selecting between conflicting tendencies to look after one's own interests or those of another. Although in many cases helping oneself will help the community, there are times when this is not so. But, as Gisela Striker explains, the Stoics never really resolved this problem. If one should go for the option that is more in accordance with nature, it is not always clear which this is. She gives the example of a case described by Cicero of two shipwrecked men, of equal worth to society, with a plank of wood sufficient to save one between them. Should the stronger man push off the weaker one? If virtue is synonymous here with altruism, which she argues it is, and nature suggests that self-love is stronger than benevolence to a stranger, Stoic ethics cannot find an answer.<sup>15</sup>

To return to Epictetus's guidance given above, he asserts in this passage that 'the one principle of action which governs all things [is] – to be at unity with themselves'. This is similar to Zeno's definition of the goal as 'living in agreement' or 'living consistently' and its interpretation by Stobaeus to mean 'living in accordance with a single harmonious principle'.<sup>16</sup> The Stoics conflate this with living in accordance with nature, which at first seems odd. But I believe it gives a clue to the Stoic understanding of natural law, and their belief in nature's harmony and perfect rational order: it is not obvious that nature is harmonious and orderly, it could equally be seen as capricious and cruel. But the Stoics were ecologists. In noting the relationships between living organisms and their environment they saw that in nature everything acts in its own interest but in doing so it works in the interest of the other parts. That we now understand that this is because it

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<sup>14</sup> There was a drought early in our history when our numbers were few and scattered in desert regions. If we had not moved around to meet up and help each other find food and water, humans would, so the argument goes, have died out.

<sup>15</sup> Striker, pp. 248-261.

<sup>16</sup> Striker, pp. 223.

has all evolved together, each constituent part in response to the others for its own sake, rather than by intelligent design, is not important: there is 'one principle of action', a 'single harmonious principle'. I suggest that 'living according to nature' then is living according to this single ecological principle that governs relationships between organisms.

Humans, though, have developed their abilities and their culture out of proportion to the rest of the animal kingdom. Although animals in the wild can act according to impulse and this works in the best interests of all the affected parts, we cannot. We cannot any longer act naturally (as opposed to according to nature) harmoniously with our environment. We either have to restrict our impulses to what the Cynics called natural ones – although arguably they were not acting in agreement with their cultural environment – or use our rational minds to learn how to act in accordance with the principles of nature in the civilized world in which we find ourselves. To come back to my earlier comment that Stoic behaviour was learned and rational, and so cultural, rather than natural: the Stoics appreciated that culture and rationality are natural to humans. Acting according to nature as the Stoics understood it then, could perhaps be considered a form of cultural primitivism. The ideal life for a Stoic may be a 'natural' one but their philosophy teaches them to be indifferent to their surroundings while finding happiness in a way of life that is in accordance with nature.

### *Chronological Primitivism*

To what extent did Stoics understand the course of history to be one of decline from the happy ideal life of early man? The Cynics must have regarded the state of humanity to be in decline as soon as arts and technology were introduced but the Stoic position is more complicated and commentators disagree.

Lovejoy and Boas believe Stoics were chronological primitivists, but their evidence is unconvincing. Looking at Cleanthes's hymn to Zeus which they suggest provides evidence, it is clear that some men, at least, in Cleanthes's world were considered wicked.<sup>17</sup> But while Lovejoy and Boas find the implication in the hymn that men as nature made them must have been perfect, and so must have fallen from this perfect state, this is not made explicit in the text – at least, not in the Inwood translation.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Zeus 'has fitted the good things with the bad so that there is one eternal rational principle for them all' and is the god of dark clouds and blazing thunderbolts as well as more benign nature. He clearly has the power to grant men wisdom to save them 'from their baleful inexperience'. But does this mean early men had it but lost it? There is nothing to suggest a fall, nor is it clear how perfect man could have fallen.<sup>19</sup>

Lovejoy and Boas also cite the Stoic theory of world-cycles as evidence of chronological primitivism: several texts relate that from time to time the universe would regenerate itself, having changed or gradually destructed over time. But again this seems to be inferred: in none of the texts cited is it clear that the condition of humanity declines between regenerations. The cosmos is thought destructible because it is generated and because one thing changes into another. With each cycle the order of the cosmos and humans is restored as it was: every man, city and village identical, repeating the same deeds and experiences.<sup>20</sup> This suggests the substance needs regenerating but says nothing of the ways of men. Nor does a theory of slow inevitable decline needing drastic renewal, followed by repetition of the same, work well with that of a fall followed by possibility of recovery (offered by wisdom).

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<sup>17</sup> Given in Inwood and Gerson, pp. 139-141.

<sup>18</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, p. 261.

<sup>19</sup> Although some myths get round this by blaming woman - Adam and Eve and Pandora's Box – there is no lament of woman here either.

<sup>20</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, p. 84, p.261, and Diogenes Laertes 7.137-142 in Inwood and Gerson, pp. 133-135.

As on many other subjects Stoics disagree, as well as their commentators, as to if and why early primitive humans might have been happier. Most of the debate centres on whether or not early man had philosophy, and whether this was important for a happy life. Some thought early humans were happier despite having no philosophy, as they had no need of it (the Cynic view); some thought they had philosophy and were happy but lost it (Posidonius's view) and others proposed that they could not be truly happy as they did not have philosophy (probably Seneca's view).

Seneca's views are not straightforward however and are worth looking at further. In Epistles LXXXVIII and XC he makes it clear that he thinks philosophy is important for living well: liberal studies, he says, are a waste of time, but there is 'one liberal study that is important because it makes men free – and that is the pursuit of wisdom.'<sup>21</sup> In Epistle XC he expands on the importance of philosophy but notes that no-one is given it although everyone has the means of acquiring it. This is a good thing, he thinks, because then we have to make an effort to appreciate it.

He tells us that early men lived in a Golden Age with wise rulers that had philosophy or something very like it until men's greed destroyed society. He criticises the Stoic Posidonius, a supporter of art and sciences,<sup>22</sup> at some length for saying philosophy brought men technology and the wise rulers invented tools. It was he says, 'human ingenuity, not wisdom' - the imperfect reason of ordinary men - that was responsible for human inventions, and technology was something humans can do without.<sup>23</sup> Wise men follow nature and a simple way of life. But after much in the same vein, it becomes evident that Seneca's earlier declaration that philosophy was in existence in a primitive era was in order to set up Posidonius's case to knock it down. He then talks of an ideal

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<sup>21</sup> Seneca, 'Epistle LXXXVIII' in *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, trans. by Robin Campbell (London: Penguin, 2004), p.151.

<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Roche, *Rousseau: Stoic and Romantic* (London: Methuen, 1974), p.8.

<sup>23</sup> Seneca, XC, p. 165.

era of lucky men when people looked after each other, enjoyed nature and lived in communes, 'into which burst avarice'.<sup>24</sup> But they had no philosophy. So though these men led enviable lives, their personalities fell short of genuine perfection: they lived in a sort of blissful ignorance, lacking the 'cardinal virtues of justice, moral insight, self-control and courage'<sup>25</sup>.

Whether this is chronological primitivism or not rather depends on the definition of primitivism. There is a sense of envy of early man, which comes out more in some of Seneca's poetical works, and there is definitely a belief in deterioration in human lives once greed sets in the technology and the arts arrive. But primitive lives were not perfect, they lacked true happiness and without philosophy, the possibility of happiness. Later humans lived in worse conditions but had the ability to be indifferent to those conditions and find happiness. If this is primitivism it is heavily qualified.

Related to the importance of philosophy to a good life, is the question of whether rationality is necessary for happiness. Animals, of course, live a natural life and were then generally considered uncultured and non-rational. Most philosophers believed man to be superior but Cynics thought it was the animals that were superior because, unlike man, they had no possessions, no desire for the unnecessary and did not suffer from the results of such desires. Because of this they were happier, even with 'neither hands nor human intelligence'.<sup>26</sup> Neither rationality nor philosophy, then, were important to happiness. The Stoic Seneca thought otherwise: 'What is the peculiar characteristic of man? Reason – which when right and perfect makes the full sum of human happiness.'<sup>27</sup> Epictetus also is clear that animals are inferior to

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<sup>24</sup> Seneca, XC, p. 174.

<sup>25</sup> Seneca XC, p. 176.

<sup>26</sup> Diogenes in *Dio Chrysostom Disc. X* in Lovejoy and Boas p. 393.

<sup>27</sup> Seneca, 'Letters 76.9-10' in A A Long and D N Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 1: Translations of Principle Sources with Philosophical Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

humans and we should not take their behaviour as an example: 'At once we ask, from what does the rational element distinguish us? From wild beasts. And from what else? From sheep and the like. Look to it then that you do nothing like a wild beast, else you destroy the Man in you and fail to fulfil his promise.'<sup>28</sup>

## *Conclusion*

Returning to the four simplified sets of ideas that broadly define primitivism, outlined at the start of this paper, it appears that none of them readily describe Stoic thought. Although their ethics emerged from the Cynics who clearly embrace a form of primitivism in their acting on natural desires, and belief that early humans and animals lived better than civilized people, Stoics moved on to rely on learned and rational behaviour rather than impulse in their efforts to find happiness. The conviction, held by some, that early humans did not have philosophy, which is important for a good life, meant that for them the primitive life was not ideal although it may be in some ways enviable. But in their belief that we should act according to the principle of nature in the civilized world in which we find ourselves there is perhaps the only form of hard cultural primitivism that can provide a realistic guide to living. While more obvious primitivism tends to be backward-looking and has had a greater influence on art – and the artist Rousseau (Henri) - this form looks forward, is practical, and has had a greater influence on the thinker Rousseau (Jean-Jacques).

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<sup>28</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses: Books 1 and 2*, trans. P E Matheson, Dover Philosophical Classics (New York: Dover, 2004), p.78.

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