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Résumé de l'article

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The Importance of Stoic Philosophy

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Abstract: The Stoic grammatical-rhetorical system of education was interrupted about 50 BCE by the intrusion of a rational logic (*logica rationalis*) which challenged the place of grammar. Marshall McLuhan and Albert Einstein are called as witnesses against the claims of this logic.

The founder of Stoic philosophy, Zeno of Kition (336-264 BCE)[1] made the linguistic discovery that language cannot exist without both a bodily element (*to somaton*) and an unbodily element (*to asomaton)*.[2] The bodily element of language can be a vocal sound (*vox, phone*) or written letters (*litterae, grammata*) (or, in our day, an electronic pulse); the unbodily element is the meaning (*sensus, ennoia*) attached to the bodily element. The bodily element enables language to be audible, visible when written, and available to the senses. The meaning, however, and this is crucial to Zeno's discovery, cannot exist apart from the bodily element.

This was a new insight into the human communication process. Neither mental activity nor physical activity can exist apart from the other. Human activity is always a combination of the two. Meaning, then, can only be grasped through language. This is perhaps the most important example of the claim of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) that the medium is the message.[3] Language as a medium is more important than the messages or meanings that are communicated through language.

What we may think of, then, as thoughts, ideas or concepts is language uttered silently to ourselves. McLuhan speaks of the electrochemical process which makes this activity possible. We learn first to speak with our mother and other native language speakers, and then we use the same language skill to communicate with ourselves in

the back-and-forth discursive activity of thought with which we are all familiar.

We sometimes talk as if we have direct access to ideas, but this is only figuratively, not literally, true.[4] McLuhan reminds us of this by saying that fish know nothing about water. Fish, whose whole existence depends upon water, know nothing about it in the same way that humans forget that no expression of their thoughts and ideas is possible without language.

Whereas pre-Stoic thinkers like Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle made little distinction between a word and its meaning, the Stoic awareness of bodily and unbodily elements in language led to them to take the meaning of meaning more seriously. The bodily element in language, the word as sounds or written characters, can have just the meaning of being itself as sounds or written characters. As a word in ordinary language, it can have the meaning of the common noun (*he prosegoria*), vague, universal and open to all its possible uses. The language or grammatical universal is the only true universal despite any competing claims from so-called mental universals. Lastly, a word in question can have the meaning of the proper noun (*to onoma*) limited to a particular use.

The distinction of common and proper nouns is still insufficient, however, since in speech we can limit the common noun to a particular case, and we can bestow the proper name or noun on more than one person, place or thing. This led to a further crucial distinction of the subject (*to hypokeimenon*), that which is being talked about, the predicate (*to apokeimenon*), that which is being said about it, and the verb (*to reima*) joining the two with both verbal and connective force.

The key linguistic grammatical unit, the sentence (*ho logos, sententia*) follows from this further distinction by which the human person, in the act of judgment, affirms the predicate of the subject with absolute clarity. The word ‘horse’, for example, can refer in sentential context just to itself as a combination of sounds or written letters (or its electronic equivalent); it can refer to one of the kinds of animals that we call horses;

and it can refer to a particular horse. The three meanings are, respectively, the self-reference, the reference and the sense of the term in question. Those who insist on the existence of a mental logic and direct access to ideas try to avoid terms having any extended senses.

Zeno by appealing to language resolved the differences found in earlier philosophies. By identifying the importance of the bodily element, Zeno agreed with Aristotle that language originates in the bodily senses. Zeno also agreed with Plato that we can identify meanings or ideas with absolute clarity, but only through language. Words by themselves have vague, ambiguous meanings; it is only in sentence context that they achieve clarity.[5]

The Stoics made Aristotle's definition of truth more explicit by tying it to language. Truth is not just the adequation of the mind to the reality; it is the adequation of the physical description (*ta semeia, ta semainonta*), language signs in the physical sense, to the reality being described (*ta semainomena*). A description of the truth, then, can be discussed, debated, and revised or discarded in the modern scientific sense, something that deserves to be more widely understood. Mental signs in this context are a contradiction in terms.

The Stoics went on to regard all of reality as a combination of bodily elements (*ta somata*) and unbodily elements (*ta asomata*). Reality, then, becomes a work of art, an artifact, with the bodily element providing the matter and the unbodily element the form. This is the case whether we think of human artists, where the Greeks were the acknowledged masters, or Zeus the divine artist shaping reality into the beauty of the cosmos. The word 'stoic' in early Stoic thought, then, did not have the negative connotation of resigned submission to fate that it acquired three and four hundred years later in the late Stoicism of Seneca (4 BCE- 65 CE), Epictetus (ca. 50-ca. 138 CE) and Marcus Aurelius (121-180).

Works of art have a double definition. They can be defined in terms of their matter or their form. A marble statue, for example, is marble shaped into a form in terms of its matter or it is a form shaped onto marble in terms of its form. A word, the *logos*, is a meaningful utterance in terms of its matter or an uttered meaning in terms of its form. All of reality can be regarded as a meaningful utterance, a *logos* in this sense. The unbodily element adds nothing to the matter itself. *Logos* easily becomes a divine name.

Language, as McLuhan insisted, is basically metaphorical in the sense that any bodily element can be given whatever meaning we wish. Virgil, the great Latin poet, captures this fact when in Eclogues 4, 60 he writes: “Begin, little child, with a laugh to know your mother” (*Incipe, parve puer, risu cognoscere matrem.*). He does not say to recognize her, know her again, but to know her initially. Here the bodily element is laughter, and the mother must begin immediately at birth the patient process of inviting the child to know her in the exchange of smiles and laughter. The child is capable of meaningful knowledge but needs the mother’s stimulus to engage in it. The child has to move from a surface experience or impression of its mother to a deep impression of her existence and importance. The Stoics believed that the deep impression, the impression that gives knowledge (*he phantasia kataleptike*),[6] was a rare gift granted only to a truly wise person. We could say that only with truly wise persons do words sink in with their full force.

The three parts of Stoic philosophy, physics (*ta physika*), logic (*ta logika*) and ethics (*ta* ethika), can be interpreted as the three parts of the human act. We need to experience something real physically, describe it logically and make the ethical judgment whether or not the description is true and worthwhile. This, again, is what goes on in modern science. In terms of description, numbers, too, are words and bound by the grammatical rules that they must be about something, say something about it and decide if what they say is true and worthwhile. In addition, mathematicians are able to create artificial or fictional situations, which may prove to have repercussions in the real world.

Grammatical problems arise for the student both when, with the help of the alphabet and the spelling of words, we put spoken language into written form and when we put written words, which in Greek initially lacked punctuation, capitalization or spaces between the words, back into spoken form with proper emphasis on the words. A third set of problems arises when we learn a new language, where we must avoid the barbarisms (*barbarismoi*) that intrude from the initial language and the solecisms (*soloikismoi*) that arise from expressions that do not work in the target language. From the initial problem of recognizing where one sentence ends and the next begins all of grammar develops in a natural progression.

Students who pride themselves on their oral mastery of their native language will be initially quite helpless when dealing with it in its written form, while other students will quickly absorb the changes required to deal with written or foreign language and proceed to deal with the thought content involved. The former students may remain mired in grammatical difficulties and never move beyond them, while the latter students will master the content, engage in oral debate, and become members of the political and legal class. The grammar teacher (ho grammatikos, literatus) is the expert in literature who spends his time more on helping students to appreciate the text than on purely grammatical questions. The earliest extant work purely on grammar is that of Apollonius Dyscolus (fl. 2nd century CE). Priscian (fl. 500 CE), who was, with the much shorter Donatus (fl. 4th CE), the main medieval grammarians, called Apollonius the greatest authority on the art of grammar (*he techne grammatike*).[7]

The Stoic grammar schools also undertook to produce students committed to a strictly honest and high moral life. Here they had the supreme case of Socrates (ca. 470-399 BCE) and his example of inspired wisdom, eloquence that held the attention of Athens and physical stamina as citizen and soldier, captured in the matchless prose of Plato and the flawless Greek of Xenophon (ca. 430-ca. 355 or 354 BCE). Plato's Socrates had warned against the sophistry of teachers who taught how to make the weaker side the stronger and the stronger side the weaker, although Socrates himself

was accused of this by the conservative playwright Aristophanes (ca. 446-ca. 386 BCE). The Stoics seem to have felt a danger borrowed from the Cynics that the youth would become too bookish and lose their natural competitiveness.

The person who took advantage of political weakness of Greece in the fourth century BCE was Philip II of Macedon (382-336 BCE),[8] the father of Alexander the Great (357-324 BCE). First, Philip, having taken over from Athens the income from the silver mines of Amphipolis, used the wealth to turn his backward capitol of Pella into a new Athens as a center of learning with Greek teachers and free tuition for worthy students, including Aristotle for his son, Alexander. Then he took the original step of keeping a highly trained standing army. He, then, himself as the friend and protector of the Greeks.

Alexander following in his father's footsteps was friendly to those who cooperated with him but made a deadly example of those who resisted him. Before Philip's assassination in 336 BCE, Alexander, at age 21 and already a tested warrior, was merciless with a rebellion in Grecian Thebes in 335 BCE, killing all the males and enslaving the women and children. He pursued the same policy after the conquest of Tyre in 332 BCE and after the battle of Gaugamela in 331 BCE.

With absolute control established over an empire of over fifty million people that included Greece, Egypt and the land from Anatolia in western Turkey to the Indus River, Alexander undertook to Hellenize its inhabitants, teaching them the Greek language and culture, which included the sublime Homer, the other poets, the playwrights, the political and forensic orators, the historians and the philosophers.

He encouraged his soldiers to marry indigenous women so that children would have a Greek-speaking parent along with the native language speaker. He invited Greek speakers to come and teach the adults who were eager to learn the official and preferred language for their own advancement and survival. He set up forty Alexandrias,[9] centers of learning, the greatest being Alexandria in Egypt with a library

that aimed at collecting all written works. The name of Kandahar in Afghanistan is a corrupted form of Alexandria.

The program of Hellenization was successful within at most three generations. It amounted to the Greek version of the Stoic grammatical-rhetorical tradition with the addition of a doctrine of military preparedness. This tradition, other things being equal, has continued in imperial settings down to our own day. The paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin felt that passing through the Greek experience was an important part of human evolution. With the soldier's life entering in, the word 'stoic' moved toward its more recent meaning of patient endurance for whatever fate has in store.

The Romans conquered the Greeks, taking over imperial rule in Egypt and as far east as Syria where the Jews and later the Christians were a thorn in their side for refusing to acknowledge the state gods. The Romans considered themselves superior to the Greeks in war and administration but accepted Greek superiority in language and culture.[10] The child, according to Quintilian in his *Institutio rhetorica*, should begin Greek as soon as possible provided Greek did not interfere with its ability to speak and pronounce Latin.[11]

The period of the dominance of Stoic thought and its grammatical-rhetorical approach to learning ended by the middle of the first century BCE. This was the period when we first hear of the children's curriculum (*he enkyklios paideia*).[12] The children's curriculum broke up the unitary grammatical-rhetorical tradition into separate subjects and this was probably the time when a separate subject called logic intruded itself between grammar and rhetoric. Logic had a long history but not in opposition to grammar. In the medieval language trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, logic proved to have less and less need for grammar. We might even say that logic pushed grammar out of the nest. Logic represented itself as the higher form of the Greek *logos*,[13] meaning reason, rather than the lower practical, physical *logos* of physical speech.

It is the physical reality of the word, however, that anchors any kind of calculation whatsoever. The claim for a mental logic (*logica speculativa, logica* rationalis) has no evidence to support it, despite its general Aristotelian-inspired dominance over the logic of speech. Aristotle (388-322 BCE) believed, to put it in the roughest terms, that all humans share a common stock of ideas from which they can fashion languages according to different human groupings. The Stoics "sayables" (lekta), too, can sound as if they are purely mental but they are better understood in the figurative sense of words not being said in actual situations. To say that Socrates is human is not meant to say that this is actually the case here and now. Aristotle's syllogisms can be understood in this sense as well.

The grammatical-rhetorical tradition was dominant, despite the incursions of an independent logic. It included all the main twelfth century figures: William of Champeaux (ca. 1070-1121), the opponent of Abelard, who became bishop of Chalons, St. Bernard (1090-1153), who dominated the first half of the twelfth century and twice had Abelard condemned for unsound teaching, and the three greatest medieval thinkers, St. Albert (ca.1200-1280), St. Bonaventure (1221-1274) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). They all recognized language and literature as the basis of sound teaching rather than what must have been the charismatic open-air logical lectures of Abelard.

McLuhan, sensing the problems raised by the intrusion of logic, made the trivium the subject of his Cambridge doctoral thesis.[14] For McLuhan, grammar in the sense of prose composition provided a picture of nature. The divisions of rhetoric, as well, were straightforward and intelligible. Logic, however, claimed a place that McLuhan following his pupil, Walter J. Ong, associated with the decay of dialog, the loss of style in favor of something mechanical, with its most appealing version in the Protestant Methodism of John Wesley.[15]

The claim of the present essay that grammar and logic are the same has the heavy weight of scholarship against it in Bobzien's work on logic[16] and in Atherton and

Blank's work on grammar.[17] Why then does Albert Einstein (1879-1955), commenting on Bertrand Russell's (1872-1970) theory of knowledge, presumably based on logic, conclude with the harsh remark that "one can see the bad intellectual conscience shining through between the lines"?[18] The mathematicians have accepted the proof of Kurt Gödel (1906-1978), Einstein's friend at Princeton, that mathematics cannot not be derived from Russell's logic.[19] Why are the logicians so slow to take up Einstein's criticism of Russell?

Einstein takes a few pages to give his own philosophy based on the importance of sensation in human perception, in contrast to Russell's assumed appeal to a non-physical logic. Russell, an excellent storyteller, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1950, seems in Einstein's mind to have broken the basic rule of human communication by presenting storytelling as if it were the literal truth and this leads to the charge of a bad intellectual conscience.

Notes

1. Nothing has survived of the earliest writings of the Stoics, Zeno of Kition (ca. 336-ca. 264 BCE), Cleanthes (ca. 330 BCE-ca. 232 BCE) and Chrysippus (ca. 279-ca. 206 BCE), except for quotations and opinions found in later writers. The fragments, as they are called, are gathered in Arnim, H. von, (1903–5) *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* Leipzig: Teubner (Volume 4, 1924) indexes by M. Adler; and translated in Long, A. A. and D. L. Sedley, eds. (1987). *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
2. https://www.historyoflogic.com/logic-stoics-two.htm The Stoic doctrine of Lekta (Sayables). In this essay, I assume that bodily and unbodily elements (*somata* and *asomata*) constitute for Stoic philosophy a basic division of reality.
3. Having lived on campus with McLuhan for many years at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, my attributions may not be in his published works.
4. To present something known to be figuratively true as if it were literally true is the height of dishonesty. The difference between figurative and literal language is taken for granted by grammarians, but logicians, who object to a term changing

its meaning in context, may find it more difficult. The difference between figurative and literal language will be the final point in this essay.

5. Augustine, *De dialectica ix.* Augustine was a grammarian and rhetorician by profession. His *De dialectica* is a Stoic grammar book and makes no distinction between grammar and dialectic. He calls grammar, meaning prose composition, the guardian of historical truth (*custos historiae*), Kaster, Robert. “Macrobius and Servius: Verecundia and the Grammarian's Function.” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 84 (1980), pp. 219-262.
6. Hedley, David N., “Zeno’s definition of phantasia kataleptike,” 2002, T. Scaltsas and A.S. Mason (eds.), *The Philosophy of Zeno. Zeno of Citium and his Legacy*, pp.
7. For the Stoic influence on grammar, see *Luhtala, Anneli (2005). Grammar and Philosophy in Late Antiquity: A Study of Priscian’s Sources. John Benjamins Publishlishing.* Apollonius drew on Stoic Ontology to analyse the noun and the verb, p. 152
8. Diodorus Siculus (fl. 1st century BCE), 1935 *Library of History*. Loeb Classical Library. Translated by C. H. Oldfather Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Books 16 and 17.
9. https://greekreporter.com/2022/04/04/cities-around-the-globe-founded-alexander-the-great
10. Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI.1151–1154.
11. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria 1, 1, 14* 1920 With an English Translation. Harold Edgeworth Butler. Cambridge. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann, Ltd.
12. enkyklios paideia Brill’s New Pauly The term *enkýklios paideía* (and similar ones, e.g., *enkýklia mathḗmata*/*paideúmata*) is only attested since *c*. 50 BC. 18.
13. Medieval thinkers struggled over what to do with grammar. Dominicus Gundissalinus (fl. 12th century)1903 *De divisione philosophiae*, 47, 11. 2-3 admits that *logos* has different meaning but the higher form is worthier of the name. William of Conches (ca. 1090/1091-ca. 1155/1170s), Priscian Commentary, MS Paris BN lat. 15130 f.1rb18 ff. says speech logic (*logica*

sermocinalis) contains the trivium, the logic of reason (*logica rationativa*) contains dialectic, rhetoric and sophistic, not grammar. Peter Abelard (ca. 1079-1142) 1919 *Logica ingredientibus* 17 ll. 12-28 is the most explicit in saying that only logic, and not grammar, has to do with truth and reality. For a discussion, see *Summa super Priscianum*, ed. Leo Reilly, Introduction, pp. 22-26.

14. McLuhan, Marshall. 2009 *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of his Time*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon. McLuhan's 1934 Cambridge doctoral thesis
15. Ong, Walter J. 2004 *Peter Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialog: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
16. Bobzien, Susanne, "Stoic Logic," 2003 in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics,"* ed. Brad Inwood Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 85-123.
17. Atherton, Catherine and David Blank, 2003 "The Stoic Contribution to Traditional Grammar" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics,"* ed. Brad Inwood Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 310-327.
18. Einstein, Albert. "Remarks on Bertrand Russell's Theory of knowledge." In Paul Arthur Schilpp, (ed. E). *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*. 3rd edn, (1st edn 1946). New York: Tudor, 1951, 293.
19. Gödel, K., *Russell's mathematical logic*, *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell (Library of Living Philosophers Volume 5)* (Schilpp, P. A., editor), Northwestern University, Evanston, 1944, pp. 123–153, [10, pp. 119–141].

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Augustine, 1975 *De dialectica*, ed. J. Pinborg Dordrecht: Riedel.

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