Stoicism

At the center of Stoic reflection on language stood the notion of a *lekton*, frequently glossed as *what is said* in an utterance (or simply as a *sayable*, that which is capable of being said in an utterance). As such, the *lekton* is to be contrasted with the utterance itself (the acoustic event) and the worldly object or state of affairs which the utterance occurs in response to. This notion provided the leverage point for Stoic critiques of Epicurean philosophy of language, and also laid the groundwork for Stoicism's many developments in logic.

As abstract, non-physical entities that serve as bearers of truth values, the Stoic notion of a *lekton* clearly anticipates the Fregean notion of a *Thought*, i.e., the proposition expressed by a declarative sentence. (Though the Stoics also operated with a category of "incomplete *lekta*" in connection with predicate phrases such as "is walking.") One notable difference between the two notions is that the Stoics were happy to allow that *lekta*, like sentences, can change their truth values according to circumstances, whereas Frege held that thoughts are either true or false eternally, and that sentences containing context sensitive expressions such as indexicals and demonstratives simply fail to fully specify the thought expressed in them. Thus, according to Stoics, the sentence "Cato is walking" expresses the *lekton* <u>Cato is walking</u>, which is true for as long as Cato is walking, and false whenever he is not. By contrast, Frege held that while utterances of the sentence type "Cato is walking" will be true or false according to circumstance, each token utterance expresses a thought indexed to a particular time (a time not itself specified in the sentence), and is true or false eternally.

Doubts would persist, however, about the ontological status of *lekta*. Whereas Frege was an unabashed Platonist, and had no qualms about positing a realm of abstract, non-physical entities to serve as the content of thoughts and utterances, the Stoics, like the Epicureans before them, were committed materialists. Thus, in the attempt to steer a course between Epicureanism and Platonism, the Stoics were forced to posit a novel ontological category (into which they would also lump other troublesome items such as void, space and time). According to the doctrine they developed, *lekta* do not have *existence* or *being* (*einai*) – for only material objects do – but nonetheless have *subsistence* (*hyphistainai*). Unlike other subsistent entities such as void, space, and time, however, *lekta* have an intrinsic connection to rational thought. Thus, as Diogenes reports, "a *lekton* is what subsists in accordance with a rational presentation."

Arguably, this notion of *lekta* as subsistent but non-existent entities was never adequately clarified in Stoic writings. (Similar criticisms have, of course, been levied against Frege's claim that thoughts occupy a "third realm" distinct from the mental and the physical.) However, even though their ontological status would remain unresolved, it could be argued that positing *lekta* paid dividends in terms of the development of logic. It is often observed that Epicureanism showed little concern with developing a systematic logic. No doubt, this was in part a matter of intellectual temperament. But possibly, their disregard of logic is in some measure also a reflection of the simple fact that their restrictive ontology – admitting only utterances and worldly objects – offered the Epicureans nothing with which *to do* logic. By contrast, the Stoics recognized logic as one of the three disciplines of philosophy, along with physics and ethics. And as can be seen from Diogenes' lengthy exposition of "the study of dialectic," Stoics would put *lekta* to good use in elucidating different forms of valid inference. These reflections constitute a genuine advance on Aristotle's syllogistic logic, and points ahead to developments that would come to full fruition, again, with the work of Gottlob Frege.

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