



## Hellenistic Philosophy

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### Introduction

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- The Greek philosophy began as speculation into the nature of the cosmos or universe (Meta Physics).
- The early philosophers, in the Pre-Socratic era, like Sophists, Democritus, Pythagoras and others made bold speculations about the origins and nature of the universe.
- With the advent of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the focus of philosophy also shifted towards morality, virtues and ethics.
- However, due to the sudden death of Alexander the Great (in 323 BC), the whole of Greece fell into a state of uncertainty & local wars and later it became a province of Rome.
- The empires that succeeded him, known as the **Hellenistic empires**, lasted for hundreds of years and spread Greek culture over huge territories.
- As the life of the average citizen was changing, the prevalent philosophical thought also underwent a change.
- Political, social and moral environment no longer sustained the creative impulses in philosophical thought and this gave rise to Hellenistic Age or post-Aristotelian philosophy.
- A common element of the philosophers in Hellenistic age was that the focus of Philosophy was shifting from general understanding of the universe to individual life and its perception as an “art of life”. Philosophy ends up being a driver of life and a source of relief, a healing art, a way to cope with a hostile world.
- This period saw the emergence of the three great schools of moral philosophy viz. **Epicureanism, Stoicism and Skepticism.**

### Epicureanism

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- This school derives its name from its founder Epicurus, who founded his school on the outskirts of Athens and famously called it as the Garden (307 BC).

- Epicureanism teaches that the **greatest good** is to seek **modest pleasures** in order to attain a state of **tranquillity, freedom from fear** ("ataraxia") and **absence from bodily pain** ("aponia").
- **Freedom from Fear:** According to this school of thought, all people live in a constant state of irrational fear, anxiety & superstition and these factors keep humans in a state of pain.
  - The biggest causes of these factors are the fear of death, the fear of being trapped in some really terrible afterlife for all of eternity and a fear of the gods.
  - **No fear of God:** This can be depicted in the concept of "**Problem of evil**" **which** stated that:
 

If God is willing to prevent evil but is not able to, then He is **not omnipotent**; if He is able, but not willing, then He is **malevolent**; if He is both able and willing, then why is there **such a thing as evil**; and if He is neither able nor willing, then **why call Him God** at all?
  - **No fear of death and afterlife:** Epicurus held that like everything else in the universe, the human soul is composed of atoms and empty spaces called void.
    - The atoms in the soul are scattered at death with no possibility of future life. Further, there is no need to fear a future state (death) of which we will have no feeling when it comes.
    - Also, this doctrine enables Epicurus to dispense with both joys of paradise and terrors of hell.
  - **No supernatural phenomena:** According to Epicureans, any belief in supernatural phenomena stagnates scientific progress by blindly accepting that a supernatural force is behind something that can't be understood.
- **Moderation in all things:** Epicurus directed that the state of tranquillity could be obtained through **knowledge** of the workings of the world and the **limiting of desires**.
  - He lauded the enjoyment of "**simple pleasures**", by which he meant **abstaining** from bodily desires.
  - It advises men to seek peace and quiet and to detach themselves from the problems of the world.
  - According to him, even **learning, culture** and **civilization** were discouraged, as they could result in disturbing one's **peace of mind**.
  - Also, Epicureans **shunned politics** as having no part in the quest for ataraxia and aponia, and likewise a potential source of **unsatisfiable desires** and frustration, which was to be avoided.

- Epicurus was one of the first to develop a notion of **justice** as a kind of **social contract**, an agreement "neither to harm nor be harmed".
  - He argued that **laws** and **punishments** in society are important so that individuals can be **free** to pursue happiness, and **just law** is one that contributes to **promoting human happiness**.
  - In some respects, this was an **early contribution** to the much later development of Liberalism and of Utilitarianism.
- In more **modern times**, the French philosopher and priest **Pierre Gassendi** (1592-1655) referred to himself as an Epicurean (and attempted to revive the doctrine), as did **Thomas Jefferson** (1743 - 1826) and the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832).

### Note:

- Epicureanism is sometimes confused with Hedonism, which is not completely true.
- Hedonism is a school of thought where pleasure is seen as the only intrinsic good., whereas Epicureanism differs in its conception of happiness as the **absence of pain**, and in its advocacy of a **simple life**.

### Stoicism

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- Stoicism first appeared in Athens in the period around 300 B.C. and was introduced by **Zeno of Citium**.
- It teaches the development of **self-control** and **fortitude** as a means of overcoming **destructive emotions and** seeks to **transform** them by a resolute Asceticism (**voluntary abstinence** from **worldly pleasures**).
- The goal of Stoicism is freedom from **passion** (in the ancient sense of "anguish" or "suffering") through the pursuit of **reason** and "**apatheia**" (apathy, in its ancient sense of being **objective, unemotional** and having **clear judgment**).
  - It teaches indifference and a "**passive**" reaction to **external** events (on the grounds that nothing external could be **either good or evil**) and **equanimity** in the face of life's highs and lows.
- The Stoics taught that becoming a **clear, unbiased** and **self-disciplined** thinker allows one to understand the "**logos**" (the natural universal reason in all things).
- An important aspect of Stoicism involves **improving** the individual's ethical and moral well-being by having a will which is **in agreement with Nature**, and by practising the **four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, justice** and **temperance**.

- For the Stoics, living according to **reason** and **virtue** is to live in harmony with the **divine order of the universe**, and recognizing the common reason and essential value of **all people**.
  - They, therefore, promoted Egalitarianism and encouraged the **acceptance** of even slaves as **equals** on the grounds that all are the "sons of God".
  - They also **denied** the importance of external differences such as **rank** and **wealth** in social relationships.
- The Stoics also believed that all the world is **one** and that a divine reality **pervades** the whole universe (Pantheism).
  - Thus, the universe is like a giant **living body**, with all parts being **interconnected**.
  - In addition, everything in the universe is **predetermined** (Determinism), although humans have a certain amount of **free will**.
- In many respects, Stoicism bears a remarkable **similarity** to the ethical teaching of **Buddhism**, which is grounded in the **four noble truths**:
  - All life has **suffering**
  - Suffering is rooted in **passion** and desire
  - Happiness is **freedom** from the passions
  - **Moral restraint** and **self-discipline** is the means by which one becomes free from suffering
- In **modern usage**, the term stoic refers to someone who is **unemotional** or **indifferent** to pain, pleasure, grief or joy.

### Note:

- Stoicism is inspired by the moral ideas of Cynicism (a toned-down version of some of the **harsher** principles of Cynicism with some **moderation** and real-world practicality).
- **Cynicism** is an ancient Greek ethical doctrine which holds that the **purpose of life** is to live a life of **Virtue** in agreement with **Nature** (which calls for only the **bare necessities** required for existence).
- This means **rejecting** all conventional desires for **health, wealth, power** and **fame**, and living a life free from all **possessions** and **property**.
- The Cynics believed that the world belongs **equally** to everyone and that **suffering** is caused by **false judgments** of what is **valuable**, and by the worthless customs and **conventions** which surround society.
- They also saw their job as acting as the **watchdog** of humanity.

### Skepticism

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- It is also known as **Pyrrhonism** or **Pyrrhonic Skepticism** after the early proponent Pyrrho of Elis.

- Skepticism holds that one should **refrain** from making **truth claims**, and **avoid** the postulation of **final truths**.
- Skepticism refers to an attitude of **doubt** or **incredulity**, either in general or toward a particular object, or to any **doubting** or **questioning** attitude or state of mind.  
It is effectively the opposite of **dogmatism** (the idea that established beliefs are **not to be disputed**) and the arbitrariness, relativity, or subjectivity of **moral values**.
- It also refers to an **inquiry** or a **method of obtaining knowledge** through systematic doubt and continual testing.
- Skeptics oppose Foundationalism (the idea that some basic beliefs that are **self-justified** or beyond justification) in that they argue that the **belief** in something does not necessarily **justify** an assertion of **knowledge** of it.
- Instead, despite the apparent conflict with the **goal of ataraxia**, they claimed to continue searching for something that might be **knowable**.
- Towards the end of the 1st Century A.D., **Agrippa the Skeptic** established **five tropes** (or grounds of doubt):
  - **Dissent** - the uncertainty of the rules of common life, and of the opinions of philosophers.
  - **Progress ad infinitum** - all proof requires some further proof (and so on, to infinity).
  - **Relation** - all things are changed as their relations become changed, or as we look upon them from different points of view.
  - **Assumption** - the truth asserted is merely a hypothesis or assumption.
  - **Circularity** - the truth asserted involves a vicious circle.
- **Criticism:** Skepticism, due to its inherent feature of refraining from any absolute or final truth, poses a dilemma to its followers whether to believe in Skepticism as a school of philosophy or not.  
**Thomas Reid** (1710 - 1796), founder of the **Scottish School of Common Sense**, argued that, if perception and the other cognitive processes are not reliable, then the faculty of **reasoning** which the skeptic uses is also bound to be **unreliable too**.

## Conclusion

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- Greek philosophy developed only very slowly after the collapse of the Roman Empire in 427 CE. Due to the rise of Christianity, the Hellenistic philosophy got sidelined, as, within Christianity, there was no place for Cynical defiance of social norms, or Epicurean emphasis on pleasure, or Stoic fatalism, and or Skeptical doubt.
- However, some philosophers of the day, not content with following any particular one of these schools, blended the views of many to suit their needs, thus creating yet another philosophical approach called Eclecticism.

- In modern times, Epicureanism survives in the form of its direct descendent, utilitarianism, which is one of the leading ethical theories today and after centuries of **religious dogmatism** throughout the Middle Ages, Skepticism again resurfaced during the late Renaissance, and particularly during the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century.