

Handouts-Lecture #14

History of Greek Philosophy

Historical Periods of Greek Philosophy

Greek philosophical thought developed over several historical epochs, each with unique characteristics:

- **The Dark Era (1100–800 BCE)** was a period following the fall of Mycenaean civilization. This era was marked by cultural and intellectual stagnation. Literacy was lost, and there was a general decline in urban and political life. Little is known about this time due to the absence of written records.
- **The Archaic Era (800–480 BCE)** saw the re-emergence of Greek city-states (poleis), along with the revival of trade, literacy, and art. It was during this period that early pre-Socratic thinkers began asking questions about the cosmos, the nature of matter, and the origins of life.
- **The Classical Era (510–333 BCE)** is often regarded as the golden age of Greek philosophy. This era featured towering intellectual figures such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The focus shifted to ethics, politics, metaphysics, and epistemology, laying the groundwork for Western philosophical traditions.
- **The Hellenistic Era (323–146 BCE)** followed the death of Alexander the Great. Greek culture spread across the Mediterranean and into Asia. Philosophy became more concerned with individual ethics and well-being. Prominent schools during this time included the **Epicureans**, who believed happiness comes from moderate pleasure and the absence of pain, and the **Stoics**, who emphasized self-control, virtue, and rationality as keys to happiness.

Classical Philosophy and Its Major Thinkers

During the Classical Era, three philosophers stood out for their lasting influence on Western thought:

Socrates (470–399 BCE)

Socrates is regarded as the father of Western ethics. He did not write any philosophical texts; his ideas were preserved through the dialogues of his student, Plato. Socrates developed the Socratic Method, a dialectical approach that used probing questions to expose contradictions and refine ideas. He believed that self-knowledge and moral integrity were essential to a virtuous life.

Plato (c. 428–347 BCE)

Plato, a student of Socrates, built on his teacher's work and extended it. He founded the Academy in Athens, one of the first institutions of higher learning in the Western world. Plato's most famous contribution was his Theory of Forms, which posited that the physical world is a shadow of a higher, perfect realm of unchanging, ideal Forms. For Plato, true knowledge could only be attained through reason and not through the senses.

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle was Plato's most brilliant student but also one of his sharpest critics. While he shared Plato's interest in metaphysical questions, he rejected the Theory of Forms as being disconnected from physical reality. Aristotle believed that knowledge begins with empirical observation and logic. He made substantial contributions to a wide range of disciplines including logic, ethics, biology, political theory, metaphysics, and more.

Aristotle's Life and Education

Aristotle was born in 384 BCE in the city of Stagira, located in northern Greece. He came from a traditional medical family, and his father, Nicomachus, served as the court physician to King Amyntus III of Macedonia. This early exposure to biology and observation would later influence Aristotle's scientific and philosophical work.

Both of Aristotle's parents died while he was still young. At the age of 17, he traveled to Athens to enroll in Plato's Academy, where he would spend 20 years as both a student and teacher. Although he greatly admired Plato, Aristotle also disagreed with many of his teacher's core ideas. In fact, Plato's later dialogues show a softening of earlier stances, possibly influenced by debates with Aristotle, his most gifted student.

Plato and Aristotle: Divergent Philosophical Views

Aristotle and Plato had key differences in their philosophies, especially regarding the nature of knowledge and reality:

- **Plato** argued that knowledge is innate, is, the soul possesses true knowledge before birth, which it recalls through reasoning. For him, the physical world is merely a distorted copy of the eternal, perfect Forms.
- **Aristotle** denied the existence of innate knowledge. Instead, he believed that human beings acquire knowledge through perception, based on interactions with the material world. He asserted that our ideas are formed by processing sensory experiences.

Aristotle's Metaphysics: Substance and Form

Aristotle developed a comprehensive theory of reality based on substance and form:

- **Substance** is the origin of everything and represents the formless matter out of which all things are made. Examples of matter include marble, stone, wood, and plastic.
- **Form** is the idea and shape that the substance takes. Every physical object combines matter (what it is made of) and form (what it is).

To explain how things come into being, Aristotle proposed the Four Causes:

1. **Material Cause** – the matter out of which something is made (e.g., wood for a table).
2. **Formal Cause** – the form or design (e.g., the concept of a table).
3. **Efficient Cause** – the agent or mechanism that brings it about (e.g., the carpenter).
4. **Final Cause** – the purpose or function (e.g., a table is made for eating).

For example, a seed becomes a plant, and ultimately a tree, which is its purpose or final cause. Everything in nature is driven by a purpose and understanding that purpose is crucial for understanding the object itself.

In human beings, Aristotle claimed that the soul is the form of the body. The soul gives the body its unity and purpose. It is what organizes the body into a living organism capable of rational thought and action.

Aristotle's Theology and Cosmology

Aristotle applied his philosophical system to the natural and divine world:

- In his cause and effect theory, he postulated that all motion and change in the universe require a cause. This led him to the concept of the Unmoved Mover—a divine being that initiates motion without itself being moved.
- He also discussed the Idea of the Heavens, where he categorized celestial and earthly substances:
 - **Sublunar substances** (below the moon) are composed of earth, water, air, and fire. They are subject to change, decay, and imperfection.
 - **Lunar or celestial substances** (above the moon) are perfect, eternal, and composed of a fifth element called aether.

This cosmological hierarchy reinforced Aristotle's view of a purposeful and orderly universe.

Aristotle's Ethics and the Path to Happiness

For Aristotle, the ultimate aim of life is happiness, or eudaimonia. This is not a fleeting emotion, but a deep sense of fulfillment achieved by realizing one's full potential.

He believed that individuals could attain happiness through self-realization by understanding their nature and developing their talents and reasoning abilities. Civic life, wealth, and social status are all means to an end, not ends in themselves.

Aristotle emphasized the importance of virtue, which he defined as a mean between extremes. For example, courage is a virtue that lies between cowardice and recklessness. He promoted moderation in all things.

To act virtuously means:

- Doing the right thing,
- To the right person,
- At the right time,
- To the proper extent,
- In the correct fashion,
- For the right reason.

This nuanced view of ethics highlights the complexity and intentionality required for moral behavior.

Aristotle's Social Ethics: Class and Gender Divisions

Aristotle held views on social structure that reflected the norms of ancient Greece but are controversial today:

- He claimed that "male is by nature superior" and that men demonstrate courage by commanding, while women do so by obeying.
- Nonetheless, he acknowledged the importance of women's well-being in a functional society, stating: "A society cannot be happy unless women are happy too."

Aristotle believed that the state should control family life, including matters such as population regulation.

Regarding slavery, he believed that some people are "slaves by nature", created to obey, and referred to them as "tools with voice". He divided humanity into:

- Those "rulers by nature",

- And those who are “submitted by nature.”

Classical Philosophers on Naturalism and Materialism

Greek philosophers held diverse views on naturalism (the belief that everything arises from natural properties) and materialism (the belief that matter is the fundamental substance of reality):

- Plato promoted idealism and dualism. He believed in universals—ideal Forms that existed beyond material reality. For Plato, the ideal man was a combination of substance and form, where the soul strived to escape the limitations of the body.
- Aristotle, in contrast, offered a naturalistic and materialist framework. He rejected the separation between matter and form. He introduced the Unmoved Mover to explain the origin of motion and the universe. He also outlined three kinds of substances:
 1. **Sublunar substances** (changing and perishable),
 2. **Lunar substances** (eternal and celestial),
 3. **A third category** involves divine or immaterial beings like the Unmoved Mover.

His teleological view suggested that everything in the universe has a purpose or end-goal, and nothing exists without a reason.