

HUM123 – Lecture 18

Hellenistic Philosophy

Hellenistic philosophy is a collective term for the various philosophical schools and traditions that emerged and thrived in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's conquests. These schools were shaped by the cultural exchanges between Greek, Persian, and Indian civilizations, as well as a growing interest in mysticism and individual spirituality.

With the political instability and social transformations of the period, the Greek philosophical tradition began to turn inward. Speculation about the nature of the universe was replaced by a focus on the individual's role within it, especially how one might achieve happiness, peace, and meaning amid a disordered world. Philosophy was no longer simply a theoretical endeavor as it became an "art of life," a healing practice, and a tool for coping with adversity.

Five Philosophies of the Hellenistic Era

The major philosophical schools of the Hellenistic period included:

- **Cynicism**
- **Stoicism**
- **Skepticism**
- **Epicureanism**
- **Neo-Platonism**

Each of these schools developed unique answers to the challenges of their time, focusing primarily on how to live ethically and attain **inner peace** in a changing world.

Philosophical Impacts: The Cynics

The Cynics were known for their bold speech and "shameless" behavior, which intentionally rejected social norms and expectations. Inspired by spiritual traditions, especially elements from Hinduism and Christianity, the Cynics advocated for a return to a natural way of living, free from societal conventions and material concerns.

One of the most notable admirers of Cynicism was Friedrich Nietzsche, who praised the Cynic lifestyle as the "highest stage one can reach on earth." Cynic ideals also influenced Muslim mysticism, particularly in their shared commitment to renouncing the material world in pursuit of spiritual purity.

For Cynics, the "good life" was defined by living according to nature and achieving self-sufficiency through ascetic training (ascesis). Their ethical goal was *apatheia*, a state of emotional indifference or "freedom from suffering."

Stoic Philosophical Summary

Stoicism promoted a deeply cosmopolitan philosophy, best captured in the phrase: “I am not an Athenian but a citizen of the world.” It emphasized self-discipline, rationality, and a commitment to living in harmony with universal nature.

Stoics believed in equality of all humans, opposing slavery and hierarchical distinctions based on wealth or social class. They argued that all individuals are inherently equal because nature created them so, and that virtue, not social status, is the only true measure of a person.

Stoic philosophy gained popularity in Roman society, influencing key figures such as Cicero, Epictetus, Cato, Marcus Aurelius, and Seneca. Stoic ideals deeply impacted Christian and Islamic thought and laid the groundwork for modern Humanist philosophy.

The Stoics held that humanity is an essential part of nature. A meaningful life arises when one’s actions align with natural order and rational principles. Emotions were seen as disruptions to rational judgment and were to be regulated through reason.

Skepticism

Full Definition of Skepticism

Skepticism is defined as an attitude of doubt or the suspension of judgment about knowledge claims. According to Skeptics, “true knowledge or knowledge of any particular area is uncertain,” and no claim can be absolutely justified. Skepticism involves a deliberate practice of withholding belief, particularly when certainty is unattainable.

For example, instead of claiming “Honey is sweet,” a skeptic would say “Honey appears sweet”, acknowledging that perception is subjective and not universally valid.

Pyrrho as First Skeptic Philosopher

Pyrrho of Elis (360 BCE), often considered the first skeptic philosopher, was part of Alexander the Great’s military campaign and traveled extensively, including to India, where he is said to have encountered Indian sages. His experiences likely influenced his development of skeptical thought, particularly the notion that beliefs should be formed cautiously and held tentatively.

Pyrrho’s philosophy emphasized that one should live without dogmatic belief, relying instead on rational observation. His teachings were later documented by his student, Timon. The split of Plato’s Academy into Old and New Academies furthered the rise of Skepticism, especially under Pyrrho’s and Timon’s leadership.

Arcesilaus and Carneades

Two of the most influential Skeptics in the post-Pyrrhonian tradition were:

- **Arcesilaus (316–241 BCE)** – Head of Plato’s Academy, who shifted its focus from traditional Platonism to Academic Skepticism.
- **Carneades (214–129 BCE)** – Continued Arcesilaus’s work and famously asserted: “Nothing can be known, not even this.”

Reality of Truth

Skeptics argued that we never know the true nature of things—only their appearance to us. Since different people experience the same object differently, we cannot determine which view is correct. Therefore, no belief can be justifiably preferred over another, and one should adopt a stance of complete suspension of judgment, “asserting nothing definite”.

Skeptic Ethics

Skepticism promoted an ethical philosophy centered on achieving “ataraxia”, a state of inner peace, freedom from worry, and emotional detachment. Since there is no rational basis for distinguishing between good and evil, these concepts are seen as cultural constructs, shaped by opinion, law, and tradition.

Skeptics taught that desires lead to suffering, and by relinquishing them, one could achieve tranquility of the soul. Without the attachment to the idea that one thing is better than another, the wise person becomes free from disappointment and unhappiness.

Skeptic Troops of Doubt

Skeptics developed five core arguments known as “**troops of doubt**”, to justify the suspension of belief:

1. **Dissent** – Disagreements between thinkers show that nothing is universally accepted.
2. **Progress ad infinitum** – Every proof requires another proof, leading to endless regression.
3. **Relation** – Perception and judgment change based on context and perspective.
4. **Assumption** – Many beliefs are based on unproven assumptions.
5. **Circularity** – Claims often depend on circular reasoning, e.g., A is true because of B, but B is justified by A.

Descartes and Hume on Skepticism

René Descartes employed methodological skepticism by discarding all beliefs that could be doubted, to build knowledge from a secure foundation. His famous conclusion, “Dubito, ergo cogito, ergo sum” (I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am), aimed to establish at least one indubitable truth.

David Hume, a British empiricist, echoed many skeptical concerns. He argued that our basic beliefs about the world such as causality, or even the self cannot be rationally justified. Instead, we accept them out of habit and instinct. His principle that “a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence” was later paraphrased by Marcello Truzzi: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.”

Criticisms of Skepticism

Skepticism has faced criticism on both philosophical and practical grounds. Critics argue that just because something cannot be absolutely proven does not mean it cannot be reasonably believed. Furthermore, Skepticism is self-defeating—if no belief is certain, then Skepticism itself cannot be held as certainly true.

Thomas Reid, a Scottish philosopher, criticized Skeptics for undermining the very faculties (like reason and perception) that they use to make their arguments. According to Reid, if reasoning is untrustworthy, then Skeptic arguments cannot be trusted either.

Skeptic Philosophy Summary

Skepticism appeals to those disillusioned with philosophical certainty. However, it has been called a “lazy man’s consolation” because it equates ignorance with wisdom. The philosophical skeptic does not simply say, “I don’t know,” but rather, “Nobody knows, and nobody ever can know,” which reflects a form of dogmatic doubt.

Neo-Platonism Philosophy

Neo-Platonism is a Hellenistic philosophical system founded by Plotinus (204–270 CE). It revives and reinterprets Plato’s philosophy, blending it with Persian, Indian, and Egyptian religious ideas.

Plotinus, born in Egypt, moved to Rome around 245 CE and founded a school of philosophy. His work merged Greek metaphysics with mystical theology, creating a vision of reality based on the idea of divine unity.

Metaphysical “The One” Philosophy

At the heart of Neo-Platonism is “The One”, also called “The First” or “The Good.” It is a divine source from which all existence flows. The One is both matter and concept, existing everywhere and nowhere. Like the Sun, it gives light and energy without diminishing itself.

From The One Emanate:

1. **Spirit (Nous)** – the divine intellect, an image of the One
2. **Soul** – the human capacity for reason and consciousness
3. **Matter** – the lowest form of existence, inert and lifeless

One–Spirit–Soul

The One is often equated with God or Goodness, permeating all things. The Spirit is the divine reflection of the One—a being without parts. The Soul is the divine intellect, capable of perceiving the One. To access this divine reality, we must set aside the body and use the soul to rise above base desires.

Absolute Consciousness

Plotinus believed that knowing the divine begins with self-knowledge. The soul and spirit are reflections of the One, and humans must turn inward to find this divine light. The material world, by contrast, is darkness, and the furthest removed from consciousness.

Plotinus on the Idea of Universals

Plotinus agreed with Plato’s theory of Ideal Forms, asserting that all things are pre-defined in an ideal world, even though they appear to change in the material world. This material world is merely an illusion, and the goal is to ascend to the world of ideas, or the “real world.”

Plotinus’s Ethics

Ethically, Plotinus taught that true happiness is independent of the physical world and instead depends on metaphysical union with the divine. Virtues help purify the soul, but their ultimate function is to prepare the individual for communion with divine consciousness. The highest ethical aim is to “bring back the god in us to the divine in the All.”

Philosophical Influence of Neo-Platonism

Neo-Platonism was immensely influential in shaping Western and Eastern religious thought. It inspired:

- Christian theologians such as Augustine and the Cappadocian Fathers
- Mystical Christian writings, especially Pseudo-Dionysius
- Islamic philosophers like Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Avicenna (Ibn Sina)
- Jewish thinkers, including Maimonides

Neo-Platonism played a key role in integrating ancient philosophy with theology, helping preserve Greek thought through the Middle Ages.