

Hellenism

Having read about the natural philosophers and Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, you are now familiar with the foundations of European philosophy. So from now on we will drop the introductory questions which you earlier received in white envelopes. I imagine you probably have plenty of other assignments and tests at school.

I shall now tell you about the long period from Aristotle near the end of the fourth century b.c. right up to the early Middle Ages around A.D. 400. Notice that we can now write both b.c. and A.D. because Christianity

was in fact one of the most important, and the most mysterious, factors of the period.

Aristotle died in the year 322 b.c., at the time when Athens had lost its dominant role. This was not least due to the political upheavals resulting from the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.).

Alexander the Great was the King of Macedonia. Aristotle was also from Macedonia, and for a time he was even the young Alexander's tutor. It was Alexander who won the final, decisive victory over the Persians. And moreover, with his many conquests he linked both Egypt and the Orient as far east as India to the Greek civilization.



Extent of Alexander's Empire

This marked the beginning of a new epoch in the history of mankind. A civilization sprang up in which Greek culture and the Greek language played a leading role. This period, which lasted for about 300 years, is known as Hellenism. The term Hellenism refers to both the period of time and the Greek-dominated culture that prevailed in the three Hellenistic kingdoms of Macedonia, Syria, and Egypt.

However, from about the year 50 b.c., Rome secured the upper hand in military and political affairs. The new superpower gradually conquered all the Hellenistic kingdoms, and from then on Roman culture and the Latin language were predominant from Spain in the west to far into Asia. This was the beginning of the Roman period, which we often refer to as late Antiquity. But remember one thing – before the Romans managed to conquer the Hellenistic world, Rome itself was a province of Greek culture. So Greek culture and Greek philosophy came to play an important role long after the political influence of the Greeks was a thing of the past.

Religion, Philosophy and Science

Hellenism was characterized by the fact that the borders between the various countries and cultures became erased. Previously the Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Syrians, and the Persians had worshipped their own gods within what we generally call a “national religion.” Now the different cultures merged into one great witch’s caldron of religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas.

We could perhaps say that the town square was replaced by the world arena. The old town square had also buzzed with voices, bringing now different wares to market, now different thoughts and ideas. The new aspect was that town squares were being filled with wares and ideas from all over the world. The voices were buzzing in many different languages.

We have already mentioned that the Greek view of life was now much more widespread than it had been in the former Greek cultural areas. But as time went on, Oriental gods were also worshipped in all the Mediterranean countries. New religious formations arose that could draw on the gods and the beliefs of many of the old nations. This is called syncretism or the fusion of creeds.

Prior to this, people had felt a strong affinity with their own folk and their own city-state. But as the borders and boundaries became erased, many people began to experience doubt and uncertainty about their philosophy of life. Late Antiquity was generally characterized by religious doubts, cultural dissolution, and pessimism. It was said that “the world has grown old.”

A common feature of the new religious formations during the Hellenistic period was that they frequently contained teachings about how mankind could attain salvation from death. These teachings were often secret. By accepting the teachings and performing certain rituals, a believer could hope for the immortality of the soul and eternal life. A certain insight into the true nature of the universe could be just as important for the salvation of the soul as religious rituals.

So much for the new religions. But philosophy was also moving increasingly in the direction of “salvation” and serenity. Philosophic insight, it was now thought, did not only have its own reward; it should also free mankind from pessimism and the fear of death. Thus the boundaries between religion and philosophy were gradually eliminated.

In general, the philosophy of Hellenism was not startlingly original. No new Plato or Aristotle appeared on the scene. On the contrary, the three great Athenian philosophers were a source of inspiration to a number of philosophic trends which I shall briefly describe in a moment.

Hellenistic science, too, was influenced by a blend of knowledge from the various cultures. The town of Alexandria played a key role here as a meeting place between East and West. While Athens remained the center of philosophy with still functioning schools of philosophy after Plato and Aristotle, Alexandria became the center for science. With its extensive library, it became the center for mathematics, astronomy, biology, and medicine.

Hellenistic culture could well be compared to the world of today. The twentieth century has also been influenced by an increasingly open civilization. In our own time, too, this opening out has resulted in tremendous upheavals for religion and philosophy. And just as in Rome around the beginning of the Christian era one could come across Greek, Egyptian, and Oriental religions, today, as we approach the end of the twentieth

century, we can find in all European cities of any size religions from all parts of the world.

We also see nowadays how a conglomeration of old and new religions, philosophies, and sciences can form the basis of new offers on the “view-of-life” market. Much of this “new knowledge” is actually the flotsam of old thought, some of whose roots go back to Hellenism.

As I have said, Hellenistic philosophy continued to work with the problems raised by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Common to them all was their desire to discover how mankind should best live and die. They were concerned with ethics. In the new civilization, this became the central philosophical project. The main emphasis was on finding out what true happiness was and how it could be achieved. We are going to look at four of these philosophical trends.

The Cynics

The story goes that one day Socrates stood gazing at a stall that sold all kinds of wares. Finally he said, “What a lot of things I don’t need!”

This statement could be the motto for the Cynic school of philosophy, founded by Antisthenes in Athens around 400 a.c.

Antisthenes had been a pupil of Socrates, and had become particularly interested in his frugality.

The Cynics emphasized that true happiness is not found in external advantages such as material luxury, political power, or good health. True happiness lies in not being dependent on such random and fleeting things. And because happiness does not consist in benefits of

this kind, it is within everyone's reach. Moreover, having once been attained, it can never be lost.

The best known of the Cynics was Diogenes, a pupil of Antisthenes, who reputedly lived in a barrel and owned nothing but a cloak, a stick, and a bread bag. (So it wasn't easy to steal his happiness from him!) One day while he was sitting beside his barrel enjoying the sun, he was visited by Alexander the Great. The emperor stood before him and asked if there was anything he could do for him. Was there anything he desired? "Yes," Diogenes replied. "Stand to one side. You're blocking the sun." Thus Diogenes showed that he was no less happy and rich than the great man before him. He had everything he desired.

The Cynics believed that people did not need to be concerned about their own health. Even suffering and death should not disturb them. Nor should they let themselves be tormented by concern for other people's woes.

Nowadays the terms "cynical" and "cynicism" have come to mean a sneering disbelief in human sincerity, and they imply insensitivity to other people's suffering.

The Stoics

The Cynics were instrumental in the development of the Stoic school of philosophy, which grew up in Athens around 300 B.c. Its founder was Zeno, who came originally from Cyprus and joined the Cynics in Athens after being shipwrecked. He used to gather his followers under a portico. The name "Stoic" comes from the Greek

word for portico (stoa). Stoicism was later to have great significance for Roman culture.

Like Heraclitus, the Stoics believed that everyone was a part of the same common sense-or "logos." They thought that each person was like a world in miniature, or "microcosmos," which is a reflection of the "macrocosmos."

This led to the thought that there exists a universal rightness, the so-called natural law. And because this natural law was based on timeless human and universal reason, it did not alter with time and place. In this, then, the Stoics sided with Socrates against the Sophists.

Natural law governed all mankind, even slaves. The Stoics considered the legal statutes of the various states merely as incomplete imitations of the "law" embedded in nature itself.

In the same way that the Stoics erased the difference between the individual and the universe, they also denied any conflict between "spirit" and "matter." There is only one nature, they averred. This kind of idea is called monism (in contrast to Plato's clear dualism or two-fold real

As true children of their time, the Stoics were distinctly "cosmopolitan," in that they were more receptive to contemporary culture than the "barrel philosophers" (the Cynics). They drew attention to human fellowship, they were preoccupied with politics, and many of them, notably the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180), were active statesmen. They encouraged Greek culture and philosophy in Rome, one of the most distinguished of them being the orator,

philosopher, and statesman Cicero (106-43 b.c.). It was he who formed the very concept of “humanism” – that is, a view of life that has the individual as its central focus. Some years later, the Stoic Seneca (4 b.c.-a.d. 65) said that “to mankind, mankind is holy.” This has remained a slogan for humanism ever since.

The Stoics, moreover, emphasized that all natural processes, such as sickness and death, follow the unbreakable laws of nature. Man must therefore learn to accept his destiny. Nothing happens accidentally. Everything happens through necessity, so it is of little use to complain when fate comes knocking at the door. One must also accept the happy events of life unperturbed, they thought. In this we see their kinship with the Cynics, who claimed that all external events were unimportant. Even today we use the term “stoic calm” about someone who does not let his feelings take over.

The Epicureans

As we have seen, Socrates was concerned with finding out how man could live a good life. Both the Cynics and the Stoics interpreted his philosophy as meaning that man had to free himself from material luxuries. But Socrates also had a pupil named Aristippus. He believed that the aim of life was to attain the highest possible sensory enjoyment. “The highest good is pleasure,” he said, “the greatest evil is pain.” So he wished to develop a way of life whose aim was to avoid pain in all forms. (The Cynics and the Stoics believed in enduring pain of all kinds, which is not the same as setting out to avoid pain.)

Around the year 300 B.C., Epicurus (341-270) founded a school of philosophy in Athens. His followers were called Epicureans. He developed the pleasure ethic of Aristippus and combined it with the atom theory of Democritus.

The story goes that the Epicureans lived in a garden. They were therefore known as the “garden philosophers.” Above the entrance to this garden there is said to have hung a notice saying, “Stranger, here you will live well. Here pleasure is the highest good.”

Epicurus emphasized that the pleasurable results of an action must always be weighed against its possible side effects. If you have ever binged on chocolate you know what I mean. If you haven’t, try this exercise: Take all your saved-up pocket money and buy two hundred crowns’ worth of chocolate. (We’ll assume you like chocolate.) It is essential to this exercise that you eat it all at one time. About half an hour later, when all that delicious chocolate is eaten, you will understand what Epicurus meant by side effects.

Epicurus also believed that a pleasurable result in the short term must be weighed against the possibility of a greater, more lasting, or more intense pleasure in the long term. (Maybe you abstain from eating chocolate for a whole year because you prefer to save up all your pocket money and buy a new bike or go on an expensive vacation abroad.) Unlike animals, we are able to plan our lives. We have the ability to make a “pleasure calculation.” Chocolate is good, but a new bike or a trip to England is better.

Epicurus emphasized, though, that “pleasure” does not necessarily mean sensual pleasure-like eating chocolate, for instance. Values such as friendship and the appreciation of art also count. Moreover, the enjoyment of life required the old Greek ideals of self-control, temperance, and serenity. Desire must be curbed, and serenity will help us to endure pain.

Fear of the gods brought many people to the garden of Epicurus. In this connection, the atom theory of Democritus was a useful cure for religious superstitions. In order to live a good life it is not unimportant to overcome the fear of death. To this end Epicurus made use of Democritus’s theory of the “soul atoms.” You may perhaps remember that Democritus believed there was no life after death because when we die, the “soul atoms” disperse in all directions.

“Death does not concern us,” Epicurus said quite simply, “because as long as we exist, death is not here. And when it does come, we no longer exist.” (When you think about it, no one has ever been bothered by being dead.)

Epicurus summed up his liberating philosophy with what he called the four medicinal herbs:

The gods are not to be feared.

Death is nothing to worry about.

Good is easy to attain.

The fearful is easy to endure.

From a Greek point of view, there was nothing new in comparing philosophical projects with those of medical science. The intention was simply that man

should equip himself with a “philosophic medicine chest” containing the four ingredients I mentioned.

In contrast to the Stoics, the Epicureans showed little or no interest in politics and the community. “Live in seclusion!” was the advice of Epicurus. We could perhaps compare his “garden” with our present-day communes. There are many people in our own time who have sought a “safe harbor”-away from society.

After Epicurus, many Epicureans developed an overemphasis on self-indulgence. Their motto was “Live for the moment!” The word “epicurean” is used in a negative sense nowadays to describe someone who lives only for pleasure.

Neoplatonism

As I showed you, Cynicism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism all had their roots in the teaching of Socrates. They also made use of certain of the pre-Socratics like Heraclitus and Democritus.

But the most remarkable philosophic trend in the late Hellenistic period was first and foremost inspired by Plato’s philosophy. We therefore call it Neoplatonism.

The most important figure in Neoplatonism was Plotinus (c. 205-270), who studied philosophy in Alexandria but later settled in Rome. It is interesting to note that he came from Alexandria, the city that had been the central meeting point for Greek philosophy and Oriental mysticism for several centuries. Plotinus brought with him to Rome a doctrine of salvation that was to compete seriously with Christianity when its time

came. However, Neoplatonism also became a strong influence in mainstream Christian theology as well.

Remember Plato's doctrine of ideas, and the way he distinguished between the world of ideas and the sensory world. This meant establishing a clear division between the soul and the body. Man thus became a dual creature: our body consisted of earth and dust like everything else in the sensory world, but we also had an immortal soul. This was widely believed by many Greeks long before Plato. Plotinus was also familiar with similar ideas from Asia.

Plotinus believed that the world is a span between two poles. At one end is the divine light which he calls the One. Sometimes he calls it God. At the other end is absolute darkness, which receives none of the light from the One. But Plotinus's point is that this darkness actually has no existence. It is simply the absence of light—in other words, it is not. All that exists is God, or the One, but in the same way that a beam of light grows progressively dimmer and is gradually extinguished, there is somewhere a point that the divine glow cannot reach.

According to Plotinus, the soul is illuminated by the light from the One, while matter is the darkness that has no real existence. But the forms in nature have a faint glow of the One.

Imagine a great burning bonfire in the night from which sparks fly in all directions. A wide radius of light from the bonfire turns night into day in the immediate area; but the glow from the fire is visible even from a distance of several miles. If we went even further away,

we would be able to see a tiny speck of light like a far-off lantern in the dark, and if we went on moving away, at some point the light would not reach us. Somewhere the rays of light disappear into the night, and when it is completely dark we see nothing. There are neither shapes nor shadows.

Imagine now that reality is a bonfire like this. That which is burning is God—and the darkness beyond is the cold matter that man and animals are made of. Closest to God are the eternal ideas which are the primal forms of all creatures. The human soul, above all, is a "spark from the fire." Yet everywhere in nature some of the divine light is shining. We can see it in all living creatures; even a rose or a bluebell has its divine glow. Furthest away from the living God are earth and water—and stone.

I am saying that there is something of the divine mystery in everything that exists. We can see it sparkle in a sunflower or a poppy. We sense more of this unfathomable mystery in a butterfly that flutters from a twig—or in a goldfish swimming in a bowl. But we are closest to God in our own soul. Only there can we become one with the great mystery of life. In truth, at very rare moments we can experience that we ourselves are that divine mystery.

Plotinus's metaphor is rather like Plato's myth of the cave: the closer we get to the mouth of the cave, the closer we get to that which all existence springs from. But in contrast to Plato's clear two-fold reality, Plotinus's doctrine is characterized by an experience of wholeness. Everything is one—for everything is God. Even the

shadows deep down in Plato's cave have a faint glow of the One.

On rare occasions in his life, Plotinus experienced a fusion of his soul with God. We usually call this a mystical experience. Plotinus is not alone in having had such experiences. People have told of them at all times and in all cultures. The details might be different, but the essential features are the same. Let us take a look at some of these features.

Mysticism

A mystical experience is an experience of merging with God or the "cosmic spirit." Many religions emphasize the gulf between God and Creation, but the mystic experiences no such gulf. He or she has experienced being "one with God" or "merging" with Him.

The idea is that what we usually call "I" is not the true "I." In short glimpses we can experience an identification with a greater "I." Some mystics call it God, others call it the cosmic spirit, Nature, or the Universe. When the fusion happens, the mystic feels that he is "losing himself"; he disappears into God or is lost in God in the same way that a drop of water loses itself when it merges with the sea. An Indian mystic once expressed it in this way: "When I was, God was not. When God is, I am no more." The Christian mystic Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) put it another way: Every drop becomes the sea when it flows oceanward, just as at last the soul ascends and thus becomes the Lord.

Now you might feel that it cannot be particularly pleasant to "lose oneself." I know what you mean. But the point is that what you lose is so very much less than what you gain. You lose yourself only in the form you have at the moment, but at the same time you realize that you are something much bigger. You are the universe. In fact, you are the cosmic spirit itself. It is you who are God. If you have to lose yourself as who you think you are, you can take comfort in the knowledge that this "everyday I" is something you will lose one day anyway. Your real "I" which you can only experience if you are able to lose yourself, is, according to the mystics, like a mysterious fire that goes on burning to all eternity.

But a mystical experience like this does not always come of itself. The mystic may have to seek the path of "purification and enlightenment" to his meeting with God. This path consists of the simple life and various meditation techniques. Then all at once the mystic achieves his goal, and can exclaim, "I am God" or "I am You."

Mystical trends are found in all the great world religions. And the descriptions of mystical experiences given by the mystics show a remarkable similarity across all cultural boundaries. It is in the mystic's attempt to provide a religious or philosophic interpretation of the mystical experience that his cultural background reveals itself.

In Western mysticism-that is, within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam-the mystic emphasizes that his meeting is with a personal God. Although God is present both in nature and in the human soul, he is also far above

and beyond the world. In Eastern mysticism-that is, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Chinese religion-it is more usual to emphasize that the mystic experiences a total fusion with God or the "cosmic spirit."

"I am the cosmic spirit," the mystic can exclaim, or "I am God." For God is not only present in the world; he has nowhere else to be.

In India, especially, there have been strong mystical movements since long before the time of Plato. Swami Vivekenanda, an Indian who was instrumental in bringing Hinduism to the west, once said, "Just as certain world religions say that people who do not believe in a personal God outside themselves are atheists, we say that a person who does not believe in himself is an atheist. of eternity."

Not believing in the splendor of one's own soul is what we call atheism."

A mystical experience can also have ethical significance. A former president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, said once, "Love thy neighbor as thyself because you are your neighbor. It is an illusion that makes you think that your neighbor is someone other than yourself."

People of our own time who do not adhere to a particular religion also tell of mystical experiences. They have suddenly experienced something they have called "cosmic consciousness" or an "oceanic feeling." They have felt themselves wrenched out of Time and have experienced the world "from the perspective