

Remote Learning Module for 13 April 2020

Lecture Notes for Fernando Espinoza's *The Nature of Science*, Chapter 4

— Hellenistic Thought —

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Last time we met the figure of Aristotle, whose philosophical treatises and scientific investigations ranged over a broad and comprehensive spectrum of interests: from biology to meteorology, from physics to psychology, from politics and ethics to aesthetics and rhetoric. In the decades following the death of Aristotle (322 BCE) and his erstwhile pupil, Alexander the Great (323 BCE), however, the Greek-speaking world was plunged into nothing short of a great cultural cataclysm, as the old political order of independent *poloi* was transformed into a centralized system of government, largely administered from the imperial capital, Alexandria. This new world order came to be known as Hellenism. Today we'll consider the principle philosophical and scientific achievements of the Hellenistic Age, which stretches well into the Common Era, the rise of the Roman Republic, and even into the Roman Empire.

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(1) In contrast to the incessant speculative questioning of Plato and the Academicians who continued his methods of Socratic teaching, as well as the highly systematic, organized cataloging of human knowledge represented in the works of Aristotle and his followers, the Peripatetics, Hellenistic thought displays a considerable fragmentation of philosophical perspective, most notably in the area of ethics and moral philosophy. The very idea of living well for the Athenian Greeks who came of age in the days before Alexander conquered what was then considered the “known world,” was the idea of developing a good character (acquiring the moral virtues of courage, temperance, fortitude, generosity, etc.). In the Alexandrian Empire, however, in the face of enormous uncertainty and the intermingling of ideas from beyond the Greek-speaking world, moral philosophy came to be occupied with a search for new foundations: how to live a good life as defined by the old values, the old virtues, in the new geopolitical order.

(2) While the likes of Plato and Aristotle focused their primary speculative questions on matters of epistemology (theory of knowledge) and metaphysics (the fundamental nature of things; what is real and what is not), philosophers in the Hellenistic Age focused their inquiries on (i) the methods of sound reasoning (logic and rules of inference, or canonic), (ii) physics (in the broad sense of natural philosophy which included biology, meteorology, and geology, as well as what we would recognize today as physical science), and (iii) ethics.

(3) In pursuit of better understanding in each of these three areas of inquiry, four distinct schools of thought emerged, two of which were largely *destructive* in their ambitions, and two devoted to *constructive* enterprises. The destructive schools came to known as the Cynics and Skeptics, while the constructive schools were the Epicureans and the Stoics. While these four schools differed considerably in their specific doctrines and philosophical commitments, they all shared a

set of common thematic presuppositions—assumptions about the scope and limits of philosophical and scientific thinking. Among these thematic tendencies we find three major inclinations:

(i) **Empiricism:** rather than focusing attention on concepts and rational analysis, the Hellenistics tended to take sensory perception as the starting point for building systems of knowledge. Recall how natural philosophers like Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Democritus drew primary distinctions between how things appear to us and how they must be in reality. For these early thinkers, it is the business of rational inquiry to go beyond (to transcend) the appearances of things and determine the real characteristics of things in the world. For the likes of the Epicureans and Stoics, however, such efforts at rational inquiry delivered more in the way of myth than sound scientific understanding, and so they flipped the reality/appearance distinction on its head, with careful attention to sensory experience as the touchstone of inquiry.

(ii) **Materialism:** because they tended to regard sensory experience as grounding all inquiry into the natural world, the Hellenistic schools turned away from speculations involving incorporeal forces like Anaxagoras' *nous*, or abstract entities like Plato's forms. They sought their explanations what can be known directly about the material, bodily world through our immediate sensations.

(iii) **Naturalism:** in ethics and moral philosophy, all four of the major Hellenistic schools turned away from theories of happiness and virtue to worries about how to control human emotions in the face of uncertainty (a concern with which we may feel particularly sympathetic as we continue to deal with the political and economic consequences of the current global pandemic)—in other words, they asked: How can a person best free h/er soul from disturbances and troubles?

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(4) **The Stoics.** The Stoic school took its name from the place where its founder, Zeno of Citium, first taught: the *stoa poikile* (or, painted porch), which was located on the north side of the *agora* (marketplace) where Socrates once engaged in his many conversations with any and all interested parties. Our modern word, “stoical,” derives from one of the principal teachings of Zeno: we best free our souls from disturbance, from the troubles of unbridled passion, by sublimating our appetites and learning to acquiesce our ambitions in the face of necessity. As one of the later, Roman Stoics, Epictetus, wrote, we should devote our attentions to those things we can control, and simply accept the inevitability of those things over which we have no control.

(5) **The Epicureans.** The Epicurean school took its name directly from its founder, Epicurus, who was born to Athenian parents on the Island of Samos in 341 BCE. Epicurus went on to found his school, known as *The Garden*, on the outskirts of Athens. Epicurus took much inspiration from the atomistic natural philosophy of Democritus; and thus he repudiated the abstract entities of Platonic thinking. In sharp contrast with the general character of male dominated sexism in early Greek culture, Epicurus welcomed women to his Garden. Epicurus taught that the principle impediment to living well was the twin fear of the death and divine

retribution. Accordingly, he held that death is no more and no less than the dissolution of the body and soul—a simple state of nonbeing, and therefore no object of fear. As for the gods, on Epicurus’ view, the gods live their immortal lives without any concern for how human beings live out the dramas of our mortal, mortal lives: we have nothing to fear from them. To free our souls from disturbance, therefore, we should pursue the virtues of *ataraxia* (freedom from fear), *aponia* (freedom from pain) and *apatheia* (freedom from passion); and we best acquire these virtues by living moderate economic lives apart from political struggles, and by conducting our philosophical and scientific inquiries within a society of friends.

(6) The Cynics. Our modern words, “cynic,” and “cynical” derive from this school of thought, which took its name from the Greek word, *kyon* (dog). We live best, thought the Cynics, when we “live like dogs”—that is, when we simply abandon philosophical questions (to which there are no satisfactory answers in the first place) and live outside the public sphere as simple, private persons. A modern analog to these cynical folk might be found among the homeless living under our bridges and along our rivers and streams today.

(7) The Skeptics. The skeptical school can be divided into two wings: the first began in Plato’s Academy (this wing is therefore sometimes known as the school of “Academic Skeptics”; the second is known as the Pyrrhonian Skeptics, after the figure of Pyrrho. The Academic Skeptics saw themselves as returning to the incessant questioning of Socrates, and away from the speculative ambitions of Plato. The Pyrrhonians took a more radical turn, seeking to show that all human pretensions to knowledge founder on the limits of our ability to reason beyond the confines of our limited sense experience. Both wings, however, shared a common methodology: they taught the futility of philosophical speculation by pitting the doctrines of the Stoics and the Epicureans against one another, and showing that neither could hold sway over the other. You might think of their work as the intellectual equivalent of banging your head against a wall because it will feel so good when you stop.

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— Overview & Outline —

Let’s now take stock of the main features of Hellenistic Thought, along with an outline of the principle doctrines we associate with the four major schools of philosophy that prospered during the Hellenistic Age.

I. Geopolitical Background.

Consequences of the Alexandrian Empire:

- ▶ Tenor of the times: uncertainty in the face of cultural cataclysm.
- ▶ Shift from independent city states to *centralized* government.
- ▶ Philosophy becomes autonomous from politics.
- ▶ The search for **new foundations**: how to live the good life as *defined by the old values in the new order*.

II. Divisions of Philosophy.

Overall: a constriction & narrowing of questions
plus a fragmentation of philosophical perspective

1. Logic & Canonic
2. Physics
3. Ethics

III. Thematic Presuppositions.

1. Empiricism ► Elevation of sense-perception
2. Materialism ► Denial of the incorporeal
3. Naturalism ► Control of the passions
 (to free the soul from disturbances)

IV. Principal Schools.

Thematic	Scholastic	Figures	Crux
Constructive	Stoics	Zeno, Philo	Rational soul sublimates desire
	Epicureans	Aristippus, Epicurus	Appetitive soul liberates the mind
Destructive	Cynics	Antisthenes, Diogenes	Abandon philosophical questions
	Skeptics	Pyrrho, Sextus	Balance assent & denial

V. Principal Doctrines.

Philosophy as a Destructive Force

Cynics	Skeptics
Antisthenes – Diogenes	Academic Skeptics (Arcesilaus, Carneades) Pyrrhonian Skeptics (Pyrrho, Sextus)
From <i>kyon</i> (dog)	From Socratic Ignorance
Abandon philosophical questions; the first hippies—drop out; the good life lies in the sphere of the private	Pit opposing positions against one another to show the futility of reason, from which follows balance; <i>apatheia</i> .

Philosophy as a Constructive Force

Inquiry	Stoics	Epicureans
Logic	Sentence logic: atomic sentences & logical operators	Term logic: denotative definition via sense data
Epistemology	- “The graspable” = <i>gestalten</i> - clarity via system - wholism	- original data = percepts (physics) = feelings (ethics) - clarity via secure foundations - reductionism
Physics	Plenum	Atoms & void
Metaphysics	- Determinism - Teleology (intrinsic causes)	- Freedom (atomic “swerve”) - Mechanical explanation (extrinsic causes)
Theology	Divine Logos	Divine Indifference
Ethics	To free the soul from disturbances via: Sublimation & bringing the will to acquiesce in necessary truths	To free the soul from disturbances via: Moderation & cultivation of the appetites

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Next time, we'll turn our attention to Mediaeval period of philosophy, as Hellenistic thought spread throughout Northern Europe and Northern Africa, appropriated and accommodated by the three religious traditions of the Semitic peoples: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Be well everyone, and, although I imagine you are probably quite tired by now of my continuing to say so, do remember: social distancing continues to save lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently