



McKenzie Study Center, an Institute of Gutenberg College

Handout 7

The Bible and the History of Ideas

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Hellenistic (& Roman) Philosophy

A. General Character of Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy

1. **Hellenistic philosophy was therapeutic in character // involved a distinctive lack of emphasis on metaphysical speculation.**
 - a. Focus: How does an individual attain *eudaimonia* [happiness?] in this troubled world we live in?
 - i. *Therapeuo* = to remedy => *Hellenistic philosophies offered a remedy to the problem of human existence—they proposed a path to happiness in an existence that had been robbed of happiness.*
 - (A) Note: return to philosophy as existential philosophy understands the role of philosophy (Socrates); not as speculative philosophy sees the role of philosophy (Plato).
 - (1) Question of foremost importance: How should one live?
 - (2) Not the question of foremost importance: What is ultimate reality and what is its nature?
 - ii. *Distinctive answers:*
 - (A) **Stoicism:** *eudaimonia* through freedom from passion – *apatheia*
 - (B) **Epicureanism:** *eudaimonia* through freedom from fear of gods
 - (C) **Skepticism:** *eudaimonia* through freedom from doubt
 - (D) **Cynicism:** *eudaimonia* through freedom from cultural inhibitions
2. **Emerging themes that resulted from the breakdown of traditions and a breakdown of reliance on tradition (with the demise of the Greek city-state)**
 - a. Cosmopolitanism
 - b. Individualism
 - c. Eclecticism
3. **General characteristics of Hellenistic philosophy**
 - a. Religious caste to Hellenistic philosophy
 - b. More popular appeal (philosophy becomes part of general education), not merely a pursuit of the elite few
 - c. Greater specialization in science and knowledge
 - d. Less original speculation; increased commentary on older philosophers

B. Cynicism

1. **Name comes from the Greek word for dog (*Kune*); cynics advocated a back-to-nature philosophy, return to living like the dogs live.**
2. **Noteworthy Cynics**
 - a. Antisthenes, 434–366 BC
 - b. Diogenes of Sinope (nickname: the Dog, *Kuon*) 300s BC
3. **Distinctive doctrines**
 - a. Independence and self-sufficiency
 - i. *from human culture and institutions*
 - ii. *from earthly possessions, renunciation of earthly goods*
 - b. Self-control, self-mastery
 - i. *Apatheia*
 - ii. *Independence from desires*
 - c. Back-to-nature philosophy
 - d. Contempt for
 - i. *Popular opinion*
 - ii. *Values of majority*
 - iii. *Traditional state, institutions, religion, law*
 - iv. *Scientific learning*
 - v. *Art*
4. **Flavor**
 - a. Popular to masses (unlike Stoicism that appealed to disenchanting aristocrats)
 - b. Wore distinctive clothing: philosopher’s robe, knapsack, staff
 - c. Outrageous deeds as didactic strategy

C. Stoicism

1. **Name comes from *Stoa Poikile* (Painted Porches).**
2. **Founder of Stoicism**
 - a. *Zeno* of Citium, 336 BC–265 BC (not to be confused with Zeno of Elea)
 - i. *Started school in Athens in 300 BC*
3. **Distinctive doctrines:**
 - a. Determinism
 - i. *Logical determinism*
 - b. Eternal recurrence
 - i. *Cosmology from Heraclitus*
(A) ONE=fire=Reason (Logos)=God= a “material” substance

- (B) Recurring cycle of cosmos: from God (Primal Fire) to the cosmos as we know it and then back to Primal Fire (Universal Conflagration)
 - (1) ETERNAL RECURRENCE: Each world is EXACTLY like the last one.
- (C) TWO principles of reality:
 - (1) Active principle = God (Logos)
 - (a) *Contains the logoi spermatikoi*
 - (b) *God = FATE = providence*
 - (2) Passive principle = matter
- (D) No such thing as human freedom
 - (1) Yes, freedom to do what one wants / and freedom to inwardly accept or resist what must be
 - (2) No freedom to do otherwise
- c. Virtue = living in accord with nature / *logos*
- d. *Apatheia* = primary virtue

4. Other interesting doctrines:

- a. Epistemology
 - i. *No universals, only particulars (nominalism)*
 - ii. *All knowledge derived from sense perception*
 - iii. *Soul is a tabula rasa*
 - iv. *Knowledge based on a "memory" remaining in soul after perception*
- (A) Cf., Hume's "impressions," Descartes' "ideas"

5. Flavor

- a. Religious, pious devotion to the ONE
 - i. *Polytheistic worship justified as in Hinduism*
- b. Believed in and practiced divination and oracles

D. Epicureanism

1. Name comes from its founder *Epicurus* (b. 342 BC).

- a. Founded school in Athens, 306 BC
- b. Most famous disciple: *Lucretius*

2. Distinctive doctrines:

- a. The gods have no interest in us (no need to fear them).
- b. Pleasure is the ultimate good (hedonism).
 - i. *Moderate, rational hedonism*
- c. Cosmology of the Atomists

3. Other interesting doctrines:

- a. Epistemology
 - i. *All knowledge and reason is based on sense experience.*

- ii. *Three sources of knowledge: perceptions, concepts (memory images of perceptions), feelings*
 - (A) Pleasure indicates what we should choose; pain what we should avoid.

E. Skepticism (Pyrrhoism)—Pyrrho of Elis (360-270 BC)

- 1. Name comes from distinctive doctrine: skepticism with respect to the possibility of knowing truth.**
- 2. Distinctive doctrines:**
 - a. We can only know how things appear to us; this does not give us a knowledge of the way things ARE.
 - i. *Our knowledge cannot be known to truly be KNOWLEDGE.*
 - (A) ARGUMENT FROM ILLUSION
 - (B) Argument from differences for different observers
 - b. Wisdom =
 - i. *Ataraxia = withholding judgment*
 - ii. *Indifference toward all external things; aim at tranquility of soul*
 - iii. *Act in accord with probability, custom, law*

F. Neo-Pythagoreanism

- 1. Got name from reverence for Pythagoras.**
- 2. Distinctive doctrines:**
 - a. Everything is derived from the monad (point).
 - b. Introduced the notion of emanation.
 - c. Proposed that there were intermediary beings between corporeal world and supreme God.
 - d. Believed in the utter transcendence of God (beyond all categories).
 - e. Platonic Forms = ideas in the mind of God
 - f. Advocated the division of God in to two, three gods, etc.; each level of “god” successively lesser.
 - g. Soul entering body seen as a fall.
 - i. *Both rational and irrational soul*

G. Eclecticism

- 1. Tendency of philosophy, as it went on, was to borrow from other traditions and concoct one’s own idiosyncratic synthesis.**