

The Ancient Greeks

Epicureans and Stoics

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Cynicism

After Plato and Aristotle, the concerns of the philosophers moved further and further from metaphysics, epistemology, and anything resembling modern science, to the issue that had always concerned the ancient Greeks the most -- ethics. What is it to be virtuous, to have character, to live the good life, to have "arete" (nobility)?

Antisthenes (445-365) was the son of an Athenian citizen and a Thracian slave girl. After starting his own school, he came to recognize that Socrates was wiser than he. He went over, students and all, to learn from the master.

Antisthenes is the founder of **cynicism**. Cynic comes from the Greek word for dog, originally because Antisthenes taught at the Cynosarges (Dogfish) gymnasium, which had been set up for the poor of Athens.

Cynicism involves living the simple life in order that the soul can be set free. It is a "back to nature" type of philosophy, ala St. Francis of Assisi. By eliminating one's needs and possessions, one can better concentrate on the life of philosophy.

Cynicism makes virtue the only good, the only true happiness. You can't control the world and life's ups and downs, so control yourself! Inhibit your desires! become independent of the world! "I would rather go mad than feel pleasure!" said Antisthenes. Rejecting civilization, cynics tended to withdraw from society, even to live in the desert. In this, they may have influenced early Jewish and Christian monastics.

Cynicism wasn't entirely negative (from today's values perspective): They strongly encouraged individualism, believed that all men were brothers, were against war and slavery, and believed in free speech. They also believed in free love and the legitimacy of suicide!

The most famous of the cynics was **Diogenes** (412-323), a student of Antisthenes. He saw himself as a citizen of the world ("cosmopolitan") yet, for a time, lived in a discarded clay jar. There is a famous story that has Alexander the Great finding him sleeping in the sun and announcing "I am Alexander the great king!" Diogenes replied "I am Diogenes the dog!" Alexander asked if there was anything he could do for him. Diogenes just asked him to move out of the sun.

Hedonism

Aristippus (435-355) was also a student of Socrates. Originally from Cyrene on the north coast of Africa, he returned there to found his own school, where he taught the philosophy of hedonism. Hedonism is very simple: Whatever we do, we do to gain pleasure or to avoid pain. Pleasure is the only good, and the achievement of pleasure the only virtue. Morality is only a matter of culture and customs and laws, something we now call ethical relativism. Further, science, art, civilization in general, are good only to the extent that they are useful in producing pleasure.

Note, however, that Aristippus also taught that some pleasures are higher than others, and that we should be slaves to none of them. He was equally cheerful in good times and in poverty, and despised useless displays of wealth.

He and his students lived as a part of a commune-like school where all practiced what they preached, including free love, more than 2000 years before Woodstock! Women were the full equals of men, and not

only hypothetically: His daughter **Arete** succeeded him in leadership of the school and commune. She wrote 40 books herself and was honored by the city of Cyrene with the title "Light of Hellas."

Skepticism

Skepticism today is usually considered a positive thing -- not to accept anything on faith could be a motto for any number of famous philosophers! In its origin, however, it was a bit more extreme. **Pyrrho of Elis** (365-275) is usually credited with founding the "school" of skepticism. It is believed that he traveled to India and studied with the "gymnosophists" (naked lovers of wisdom), which could have been any number of Indian sects. From there, he brought back the idea that nothing can be known for certain. The senses are easily fooled, and reason follows too easily our desires.

If we cannot ever know anything for certain, then we may as well suspend our judgment, stop arguing over what will never be settled, and try to find a little peace and tranquility in life. That tranquility he called **ataraxia**. Note that, although we can't know anything for certain, we can know many things well enough to get by. The sun may or may not rise tomorrow -- but the odds are good that it will, and what use would it serve to worry about it anyway!

Likewise, if no system is ultimately supportable, for the sake of peace, simply adopt whatever system is prevalent in your neck of the woods. Pyrrho lived out his life worshiping the gods of Elis, although he would certainly never acknowledge that they had any more likelihood of reality as any other gods, or no gods at all! There are many things a skeptic might accept for convenience, even though there be no ultimate proof.

Later skeptics became prevalent among the students in Plato's Academy. One in particular, **Carneades of Cyrene** (c.214-129), was notorious for arguing one side of an issue one day and the other the next day. He said "There is absolutely no criterion for truth. For reason, senses, ideas, or whatever else may exist are all deceptive."

Stoicism

"Only the educated are free." -- Epictetus

The founder of stoicism is **Zeno of Citium** (333-262) in Cyprus. Zeno may have been Phoenician or partly so. He was a student of the cynics, but was also influenced by Socrates. His philosophy was similar to that of Antisthenes, but tempered by reason. Basically, he believed in being virtuous, and that virtue was a matter of submitting to God's will. As usual for Greeks who postulated a single god, Zeno did not strongly differentiate God from nature. So another way of putting it is to live according to nature ("Zen kata physin.").

The school got its name from the Painted Porch (stoa poikile) in Athens where Zeno studied. Walking up and down the open hallways, he lectured his students on the value of **apatheia**, the absence of passion, something not too different from the Buddhist idea of non-attachment. By "passion" Zeno meant uncontrolled emotion or physical desire. Only by taking this attitude, he felt, could we develop wisdom and the ability to apply it.

"Let no one break your will!" he said. Man conquers world by conquering himself. Start by developing an indifference to pain and pleasure, through meditation. Wisdom occurs when reason controls passions; Evil occurs when passions control us.

Another aspect of Stoicism is its belief in the development of a universal state, in which all men were brothers. Stoics believed in certain "natural rights," a concept which we wouldn't see again until the 18th century. They also believed in the right to commit suicide -- an important part of Roman cultural tradition.

The best presentation of stoicism is by the Greek slave **Epictetus** (50-138 ad), who wrote during the Roman era. There is also a little book, **Meditations**, by the Roman emperor **Marcus Aurelius** (121-180 ad).

Epicureanism

“The gods are not to be feared; death cannot be felt; the good can be won; all that we dread can be conquered.” -- Epicurus

Epicurus (341-270) was born on the island of Samos in Ionia. At 19, went to Athens to study at the Academy. It seemed, though, that he liked the philosophy of Democritus better. The school he founded was particularly egalitarian, accepting women and slaves. Epicurus, it is said, wrote 300 books. Sadly, only fragments survive.

Epicurus had little patience with religion, which he considered a form of ignorance. He was particularly eager to help people loose their fear of the gods. He did, however, also say that the gods existed, although they lived far away in space somewhere and had little or nothing to do with people on earth. Atheism, you see, was still illegal in Athens!

One of the most persistent issues concerning belief in God is the problem of evil. Epicurus's argument still holds up:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

Epicurus felt that it was useless to argue over metaphysics, that there was no such thing as a soul that lived after death, that we arrived at our present condition by means of evolution, and that we had the quality of free will.

We can see an almost “modern” materialism and empiricism here: All things -- including minds -- are made of atoms and follow natural laws. All knowledge comes from the senses. Thoughts and memories are nothing but weak sensations....

Virtue for Epicurus was a means to an end. That end is happiness. It is good to feel pleasure and to avoid pain, but one needs to apply reason to life. Sometimes pain is necessary in order to gain happiness. Other times, pleasure leads to more suffering than it is worth.

And there are levels of pain and pleasure, smaller and greater happinesses. Friendship, for example, is rated one of the highest pleasures. “A sage loves his friends as he loves himself,” he said, and “It is better to give than to receive.” And “It is not possible to live pleasantly without living prudently, honorably, and justly; nor to live prudently, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly.”

Society is seen as necessary: It protects one from injustices. He foreshadows utilitarianism by suggesting that a society should be arranged to provide the greatest happiness to the greatest number.

The ultimate happiness, though, is peace, and he borrows Pyrrho’s word for tranquility -- **ataraxia**. His motto was “*lathe biosas*” -- live unobtrusively. He may be considered the first true humanist, as witnessed by this quote: "Philosophy is an activity that uses reasoning and rigorous argument to promote human flourishing."

The best summary of epicureanism is the epic poem **On the Nature of Things** by Roman Lucretius (95-52).

Note the practical similarities between stoicism and epicureanism, despite their theoretical differences! Both were popular in the Roman era, stoicism in Rome’s early, more vigorous years and continuing among the rank and file of Roman citizenry, and epicureanism (even hedonism) behind closed doors, especially at the highest levels of the empire.

Alexander the Great introduced what is called the **Hellenistic** period of history: His empire brought Greek ideas, art, language, habits to “the world,” as far east as India and south as Egypt. But, with his death at the age of 33, his empire began to come apart, his generals dividing it amongst themselves and incompletely

conquered nations reasserting their independence. And a new people stood in the wings to take over dominance of the Mediterranean: The Romans.

And yet the influence of the Greeks would outlast the empire of Alexander, its collapse, and even the Romans. But the world had become a different place, a place of large powers maneuvering among themselves, centralized authority just like that of Asia, huge trading and marketing conglomerates tightly tied to those authorities. Not quite the place for individualistic thinking and observation.

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