



CULTURE and CIVILIZATION

Study Guide Hellenistic Philosophies

Introduction

The ancient Greeks defined their humanity within the context and the parameters of the city-state. They believed a person could only discover their intellectual, artistic, and moral talents and abilities in relationship to others. How was one to know what they thought or felt or what feats they could perform without instruction or critique from their fellow citizens? The meaning and purpose of life would be thus satisfied. After the Peloponnesian War and the collapse of this intimate world, these ancient Greeks were forced to embark on a new adventure of understanding the human condition. Alexander the Great called upon Greek thinkers, teachers, architects, etc. to "Hellenize" his newly conquered empire. However, when separated from the city-state and the shared customs of their people, these transplanted Greeks found it difficult to discover their humanity in their usual way. They lived among people speaking different languages, practicing different religions, eating different foods, following different laws and customs. What did it mean to be human in this more cosmopolitan world? In many ways, the ancient Greeks confronted the issue of us modern individuals in a global society. What does one make off the myriad of cultures out there? What is true and lasting, and what is ephemeral and relative about the human condition? The Greeks approached this problem with their customary thought-process -- reason.

The following reading discusses the philosophies that developed in the Hellenistic (Greek-like) era: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism, and Cynicism.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- 1 What is Epicureanism? Who founded it? Who could be included in this approach to life?
- 2 Why is Epicureanism not hedonism?
What is Stoicism? Who founded it? How does it reflect Greek thinking?
- 3 How would a transplanted Greek find peace and happiness in the modern world?
- 4 How did the Stoics lay the basis for a belief in a common humanity?
What is Skepticism? Was it an adaptive philosophy for this age? Our age?
- 5
- 6 What is Cynicism? Did they think civilization was a positive development in human history?

Philosophy

Hellenistic thinkers preserved the rational tradition of Greek philosophy. Like their Hellenic predecessors, they regarded the cosmos as governed by universal principles intelligible to the rational mind. For the philosophers of both ages, a crucial problem was the achievement of the good life. And both Hellenic and Hellenistic thinkers sought rules for human conduct that accorded with rational standards; both believed that individuals attain happiness through their own efforts, unaided by the gods. In the tradition of Socrates, Hellenistic thinkers taught a morality of self mastery. But although they retained the inheritance of the classical age, they also transformed it, for they had to adapt thought to the requirements of a cosmopolitan society.

In the Hellenic Age, the starting point of philosophy was the citizen's relationship to the city; in the Hellenistic Age, the point of departure was the solitary individual's relationship to humanity and the individual's personal destiny in a larger and more complex world. Philosophy tried to deal with the feeling of alienation resulting from the weakening of the individual's attachment to the polis and to arrive at a conception of community that corresponded to the social realities of a world grown larger. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Hellenistic philosophers were moralists, not great speculators and theorists. The Hellenistic schools of philosophy, in contrast to their predecessors, were far less concerned with the scientific understanding of nature. Philosophy was now chiefly preoccupied with understanding the human condition, and it tried to alleviate spiritual uneasiness and loss of security. It aspired to make persons ethically independent so that they could achieve happiness in a hostile and competitive world.

In striving for tranquillity of mind and relief from conflict, Hellenistic thinkers reflected the general anxiety that pervaded their society. They retained respect for reason and aspired to the rational life, but by stressing peace of mind and the effort to overcome anxiety they were perform-

ing a quasi-religious function. Philosophy was trying to provide comfort for the individual suffering from feelings of loneliness and insignificance; this attempt indicated that Greek civilization was undergoing a spiritual transformation (the full meaning of which we examine in Chapters 7 and 8). This gravitation toward religiosity in an effort to relieve despair gathered momentum in the centuries that followed. Thus, Hellenistic philosophies helped prepare people to accept Christianity, which promised personal salvation. Ultimately, the Christian answer to the problems of alienation and the need for community would predominate over the Greco-Roman attempt at resolution.

Epicureanism Four principal schools of philosophy arose in the Hellenistic world: Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism, and Cynicism. In the tradition of Plato and Aristotle, Epicurus (342–270 B.C.) founded a school in Athens at the end of the fourth century B.C. Epicurus broke with the attitude of the Hellenic Age in significant ways. Unlike classical Greek philosophers, Epicurus, reflecting the Greeks' changing relationship to the city, taught the value of passivity and withdrawal from civic life. To him, citizenship was not a prerequisite for individual happiness. Wise persons, said Epicurus, would refrain from engaging in public affairs, for politics could deprive them of their self-sufficiency, their freedom to choose and to act. Nor would wise individuals pursue wealth, power, or fame, for the pursuit would only provoke anxiety. For the same reason, wise persons would not surrender to hate or love, desires that distress the soul. A wise person would also try to live justly, for one who behaves unjustly is burdened with troubles. Nor could there be happiness when they worried about dying or pleasing the gods.

To Epicurus, dread that the gods interfered in human life and could inflict suffering after death was the principal cause of anxiety. To remove this source of human anguish, he favored a theory of nature that had no place for the activity of gods. Therefore, he adopted the physics of Democritus, which taught that all things consist of atoms in motion. In a universe of colliding atoms, there could be no higher intelligence ordering things; there was no room for divine activity. Epicurus



MARBLE PORTRAIT OF EPICURUS. The direct gaze and inner calm of the philosopher depicts the essence of his teachings. Epicurus believed that happiness came from a rationally ordered life. He urged his followers to disengage from the uncertainties and stress of politics, business, family, and religion. (*The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1911 [11.90]*)

taught that the gods probably did exist, but that they could not influence human affairs, so individuals could order their own lives. Epicurus embraced atomism, not as a disinterested scientist aspiring to truth, but as a moral philosopher seeking to liberate emotional life from fear of the gods.

People could achieve happiness, said Epicurus, when their bodies were “free from pain” and their minds “released from worry and fear.” Although Epicurus wanted to increase pleasure for the indi-

vidual, he rejected unbridled hedonism. Because happiness must be pursued rationally, he believed, those merely sensuous pleasures that have unpleasant aftereffects (such as overeating and overdrinking) should be avoided. In general, Epicurus espoused the traditional Greek view of moderation and prudence.

By opening his philosophy to men and women, slave and free, Greek and barbarian, and by separating ethics from politics, Epicurus fashioned a philosophy adapted to the post-Alexandrian world of kingdoms and universal culture.

Stoicism Around the time of the founding of Epicurus' school, Zeno (335–263 B.C.) also opened a school in Athens. Zeno's teachings, called Stoicism, became the most important philosophy in the Hellenistic world. By teaching that the world constituted a single society, Stoicism gave theoretical expression to the world-mindedness of the age. By arriving at the concept of a world-state, the city of humanity, Stoicism offered an answer to the problem of community and alienation posed by the decline of the city-state. By stressing inner strength in dealing with life's misfortunes, Stoicism offered an avenue to individual happiness in a world fraught with uncertainty.

At the core of Stoicism was the belief that the universe contained a principle of order, variously called the Divine Fire, God, and Divine Reason (*Logos*). This ruling principle underlay reality and permeated all things; it accounted for the orderliness of nature. The Stoics reasoned that, being part of the universe, people too shared in the *logos* that operated throughout the cosmos. The *logos* was implanted in every human soul; it enabled people to act intelligently and to comprehend the principles of order that governed nature. Since reason was common to all, human beings were essentially brothers and fundamentally equal. Reason gave individuals dignity and enabled them to recognize and respect the dignity of others. To the Stoics, all people, Greek and barbarian, free and slave, rich and poor, were fellow human beings, and one law, the law of nature, applied to all of them. Thus, the Stoics, like the Hebrews, arrived at the idea of the oneness of humanity.

Pericles had spoken of the Athenians' obligation to abide by the laws and traditions of their

city; Stoics, viewing people as citizens of the world, emphasized the individual's duty to understand and obey the natural law that governed the cosmos and applied to all. Socrates had taught a morality of self-mastery based on knowledge; the Stoics spread Socrates' philosophy beyond Athens, beyond Greece, and enlarged it, offering it as a way of life for all. Like Socrates, the Stoics believed that a person's distinctive quality was the ability to reason and that happiness came from the disciplining of emotions by the rational part of the soul. Also like Socrates, the Stoics maintained that individuals should progress morally, should perfect their character.

In the Stoic view, wise persons ordered their lives according to the natural law — the law of reason — that underlay the cosmos. This harmony with the *logos* would give them the inner strength to resist the torments inflicted by others, by fate, and by their own passionate natures. Self-mastery and inner peace, or happiness, would follow. Such individuals remain undisturbed by life's misfortunes, for their souls are their own. Even slaves were not denied this inner freedom; although their bodies were subjected to the power of their masters, their minds still remained independent and free.

Stoicism had an enduring influence on the Western mind. To some Roman political theorists, the Empire fulfilled the Stoic ideal of a world community in which people of different nationalities held citizenship and were governed by a worldwide law that accorded with the law of reason, or natural law, which operated throughout the universe. Stoic beliefs — that by nature we are all members of one family, that each person is significant, that distinctions of rank and race are of no account, and that human law should not conflict with natural law — were incorporated into Roman jurisprudence, Christian thought, and modern liberalism. There is continuity between Stoic thought and the principle of inalienable rights stated in the Declaration of Independence.

Skepticism The Epicureans tried to withdraw from the evils of this world and to attain personal happiness by reducing physical pain and mental anguish. The Stoics sought happiness by actively entering into harmony with universal reason.

Both philosophies sought peace of mind, but the Stoics did not disengage themselves from political life and often exerted influence over Hellenistic rulers. Skepticism, another school of philosophy, attacked the Epicurean and Stoic belief that there is a definite avenue to happiness. Skeptics held that one could achieve spiritual comfort by recognizing that none of the beliefs by which people lived were true or could bring happiness.

— Some Skeptics taught indifference to all theory and urged conformity to accepted views whether or not they were true. This attitude would avoid arguments and explanations. Gods might not exist, said the Skeptics, but to refuse to worship or to deny their existence would only cause trouble — therefore, individuals should follow the crowd. The life of the mind did not bring truth or happiness; so why should one bother with it? Suspending judgment, recognizing the inability to understand, not committing oneself to a system of belief — by these means one could achieve peace of mind.

Metaphysical speculation, inquiring into the origin of things, and clever reasoning would bring neither assurance nor happiness. Instead of embracing doctrines, said the Greek writer Lucian, individuals should go their way "with ever a smile and never a passion."¹ This was the position of those Skeptics who were suspicious of ideas and hostile to intellectuals.

The more sophisticated Skeptics did not run away from ideas but pointed out their limitations; they did not avoid theories but refuted them. In doing so, they did not reject reason but focused on a problem of reason — whether indeed it could arrive at truth. Thus, Carneades of Cyrene (213–129 B.C.) insisted that all ideas, even mathematical principles, must be regarded as hypotheses and assumptions, not as absolutes. Just because the universe showed signs of order, Carneades argued, one could not assume that it had been created by God. Since there was never any certainty, only probability, morality should derive from practical experience rather than from dogma.

Cynicism The Cynics were not theoretical philosophers but supreme individualists who rebelled

against established values and conventions — against every barrier of society that restrained individuals from following their own natures. Cynics regarded laws and public opinion, private property and employment, and wives and children as hindrances to the free life. Extreme individualists, the Cynics had no loyalty to family, city, or kingdom and ridiculed religion, philosophy, and literature. They renounced possessions and showed no respect for authority. When Diogenes, a fourth-century B.C. Cynic, met Alexander the Great, he is supposed to have asked only that the great conqueror get out of his light.

Cynics put their philosophy into practice. They cultivated indifference and apathy. To harden themselves against life's misfortunes, they engaged in strenuous exercise, endured cold and hunger, and lived ascetically. Not tied down by property or employment, Cynics wandered shoeless from place to place, wearing dirty and ragged clothes and carrying staffs. To show their disdain for society's customs, Cynics grew long scraggly beards, used foul language, and cultivated bad manners. Diogenes supposedly said: "Look at me, . . . I am without a home, without a city, without property, without a slave; I sleep on the ground; I have neither wife nor children, no miserable governor's mansion, but only earth, and sky, and one rough cloak. Yet what do I lack? Am I not free from pain and fear, am I not free?"⁴

In their attack on inherited conventions, Cynics strove for self-sufficiency and spiritual security. Theirs was the most radical philosophical quest for meaning and peace of soul during the Hellenistic Age.

The Hellenistic Age encompassed the period from the death of Alexander to the formation of the Roman Empire. During these three centuries, Greek civilization spread eastward as far as India and westward to Rome. People began to conceive of themselves as members of a world community, speaking a common Greek language and sharing a common Greek civilization. It was Rome, conqueror of the Mediterranean world and transmitter of Hellenism, that inherited the universalist tendencies of the Hellenistic Age and embodied them in law and institutions.