

## I. Introduction

The history of ancient Western philosophy spans over a millennium, from its origins in the mid 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE approximately to the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. This history mainly occurred in the region of modern day Greece, but also in Southern Italy, North Africa, and the Middle East. During the late Roman Republic and Empire, some important philosophical works were composed in Latin, but Greek prevailed as the language of philosophical and more generally intellectual activity throughout Western antiquity.

The history of ancient Western philosophy is commonly divided into four periods: Pre-Classical— more commonly, but misleadingly referred to as Presocratic— (7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE- c. 430 BCE), Classical (430-323 BCE), Hellenistic (323-1<sup>st</sup> c CE), and Late Antique (1<sup>st</sup> -c. 6 c.). The transitions between these periods correspond to the rise of the Athenian Empire in the fifth century, the death of Alexander the Great and the consequent tripartition of the Macedonian Empire in 323, the inception of the Roman Empire after the battle of Actium in 30 BCE, and— depending on one's preferred end-point— the Roman Emperor Justinian's closure of the pagan philosophical schools in Athens in 529 or the Arabs' conquest of Alexandria in 640, respectively.

This periodization should be taken with a grain of salt. It is a convenient device for organizing thought, but there was much greater intellectual continuity between these historical periods than might otherwise be assumed.

## II. Philosophers and Schools

Pre-Classical and Classical philosophy are often studied in terms of the contributions of individuals: for example, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Plato, and Aristotle. The Pythagoreans, who formed a sort of philosophical community in Southern Italy and subsequently elsewhere in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, are an exception. But the Hellenistic period is, to a greater extent, studied in terms of the doctrines of schools— even while foundational and extraordinary representatives of those schools may figure prominently in discussions. In part, this is due to the nature of the surviving evidence. For example, we have summaries of Stoic ethics from late antiquity, but less information about the contributions of individual Stoic thinkers to ethics. (I say more about the state of the surviving evidence in the following section.) On the other hand, in the Hellenistic period, a number of philosophical schools did in fact develop and maintain distinct doctrinal stances, often in contention with one another.

In the three and a half centuries or so before the common era, the philosophical landscape, with its geographical center in Athens, was populated principally by four schools: the Academy, founded by Plato (427-347), the Peripatos, founded by Aristotle (384-322), the Stoa, founded by Zeno of Citium (333-261), and the Garden, founded by Epicurus (341-270). Skepticism, of which Pyrrho (c. 360-270) is viewed as a founding figure, and Cynicism, of which Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412-323) is viewed as a founding figure, also constituted enduring philosophical legacies, although these were not formally organized as the other schools were. In addition, outside of Athens, Cyreniac, Elian,

Eretrian, and Megarian schools existed. However, these endured for shorter stretches of time, and our knowledge of their participants and their views is very limited.

In 176 CE, the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius, a Stoic philosopher in his own right, established chairs of philosophy at Athens in Academic, Peripatetic, Epicurean, and Stoic philosophy. Notwithstanding this institutionalization of these distinct schools, philosophical thought in late antiquity increasingly tended toward synthesis, above all of Academic, Peripatetic, and Stoic views. The philosophy of the Academic philosopher Plotinus (205-270) crystallized this trend. Consequently, late Academic philosophy, now referred to as Neoplatonism, emerged as the rubric under which elements and wisdom from various schools were drawn, reinterpreted, and integrated. In short, philosophy in the last centuries of late antiquity is, to a large extent, equivalent to Neoplatonic philosophy, which is an amalgamation and reworking of various earlier philosophical ideas.

### **III. Evidence**

Our evidence for the history of ancient Western philosophy is in a fragmentary state. Most of written philosophy from this era does not survive at all or at least not intact. From the Pre-Classical period, only scant quotations, paraphrases, and summaries by much later authors remain. Moreover, these texts are colored by their authors' distinct times, modes of conceptualization, and sometimes, for example, in the case of Christian writers, hostility toward their subjects. To a large extent the same is true of philosophy in the first two centuries of the Hellenistic period. From the Classical period, all of Plato's works, about a third of Aristotle's works, and a few works of Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor, survive; but again much has been lost. From the later Hellenistic period we have some Latin and Greek works of Epicureanism, Stoicism, and skepticism. Finally, from late antiquity we have considerably more: a number of commentaries on select Platonic and Aristotelian texts, skeptical writings of Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius' history of Greek philosophy, some Neoplatonic works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus, among others. But, once again, much more has been lost than is extant.

The limited nature of the surviving evidence of ancient philosophical activity is significant in two respects. First, of course, our ability to understand this history is impeded and complicated. Second, study of ancient philosophy that confines itself to the texts that survive intact, above all the works of Plato and Aristotle, yields a distorted conception.

### **IV. Pre-Classical Philosophy**

It is common to view Pre-Classical philosophy as dividing into two periods, Pre-Parmenidean and Post-Parmenidean, and thus with the figure of Parmenides (born *c.* 520 BCE) as pivotal. Pre-Parmenidean philosophy, the origins of ancient Western philosophy, mainly occurred in Ionia (modern day Southwestern Anatolia) and above all in the city-state of Miletus (modern day Milet).

The first Greek philosophers are, in certain respects, better conceived as proto-scientists. They were interested in the question of the origins, development, and order of

the natural world, humanity, and society, in that order. Unlike scientists, however, their inquiries were not based on experimentation, or only to an extremely limited degree, and non-empirical assumptions played a very significant role in their conceptions of the physical world and its development. For example, one Pre-Classical philosopher argued that the earth could not be at the center of the universe because the center is the most prestigious position and must be occupied by the most prestigious object, which is not the earth. Such arguments strike us as silly and strange because we believe that the answer to the question "Where in the cosmos is the earth situated?" must be based on a certain kind of empirical data and because we do not identify portions of space as having greater or lesser value per se. But, evidently, empiricism as well as the relation between ethics and physics played a different role in earlier cosmological thought.

Parmenides' poem *On Nature* is a milestone in the history of Western philosophy. Composed in the late sixth century BCE in Elea (modern day Velia in Southwestern Italy), Parmenides criticized his Ionian predecessors' preoccupations with the origins and development of nature and its inhabitants. He argued, on strictly logical grounds, that reality must in fact be a homogeneous, immutable, eternal unity and that this is the only object of knowledge. Parmenides' defense of this view, in turn, relegated accounts of the mutable, sensible natural world to the status of opinion and had the effect of engendering an epistemological split between understandings of the universe based on empiricism, on the one hand, and (at least putatively) on non-empirical reason or rationalism, on the other.

Post-Parmenidean Pre-Classical philosophy is characterized by attempts to reconcile Parmenides' conclusions with the commonsensical view of reality as consisting of the dynamic interaction of perceptible objects. Indeed, most post-Parmenidean Pre-Classical philosophers accepted that the fundamental elements of reality are ungenerated, indestructible, and, at least intrinsically, unchanging. For example, Democritus claimed that material atoms constitute the basic stuff of the world. However, Parmenides' successors also accepted that change is real, precisely, that the fundamental elements of the universe, whatever these might be, move; more precisely, they combine or mix and disintegrate or dissolve, thereby generating the variety of commonly observed entities and their behavior.

## **V. Socrates**

Some scholars have suggested that, because of the epistemological and logical nature of his thought, Parmenides should actually be identified as the first Western philosopher (in the modern, heavily epistemologically laden sense of the word). If so, then Socrates (469-399) might be identified as the first ethical philosopher. Socrates lived in Athens during its rise to political supremacy in the Greek world. In this period, Athens also became the geographical center of philosophical activity in the Mediterranean, a position it continued to hold until the Roman general Sulla besieged Athens in 87/6 BCE. Socrates absorbed the philosophical ideas of his time, but ultimately reconceived the focus of philosophy from cosmology and nature to ethics and human life. As the Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero famously wrote, "Socrates brought philosophy down from the heavens."

A number of Pre-Classical philosophers expressed ethical views. In fact, most Pre-Classical cosmologies are conceived in ethical terms; the cosmos is thought to be organized lawfully, and its order is identified with justice. But Socrates did not merely propound a particular set of ethical doctrines. Instead, he challenged claims to ethical knowledge, and he provoked inquiry into the nature of ethical properties and values. Most significantly, he challenged his contemporaries who made ethical claims to defend these claims on the basis of reasoned arguments, and he engaged them in definitional questions such as "What is goodness?" and "What is justice?"

Socrates' emphasis on ethics and on the epistemology of ethics was so influential that modern scholars have distinguished Pre-Classical philosophy, including philosophical activity in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE that appears not to have a fundamentally ethical orientation, as Presocratic. In this case, *pre*-Socratic has a logical, rather than a temporal sense.

## VI. Philosophy as a Way of Life

Today Western philosophy is, for the most part, a professional academic and secular discipline whose ostensible aim is the advancement of knowledge in a limited set of arenas (most prominently ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics). Although individual philosophers or subdisciplines of philosophy may have ethical or political objectives, by and large philosophy is not, distinctly, psychologically therapeutic or politically significant. For example, an outstandingly successful epistemologist may be a politically insignificant and disengaged citizen and an unhappy person. Of course, philosophers typically enjoy their work. But the philosophical ideas that they achieve, usually, do not provide the theoretical justification for their activity or their enjoyment of it.

In contrast, ancient Western philosophy, especially in the wake of Socrates' ethical philosophical activity, increasingly came to be identified with the cultivation of a way of life whose object was the achievement of wellbeing or happiness (*eudaimonia*). Philosophical activity was, in turn, politically significant insofar as a given conception of wellbeing conformed to or stood at odds with conventional social and political values. Indeed, more often than not, ancient philosophy tended to be a reactionary enterprise. While philosophers, usually, did not renounce the world, they often did renounce their societies or at least their society's values. Paradigmatically, Socrates was executed for his efforts at social and political reform. Plato was critical of democracy, while he spent much of his life in democratic Athens. The Epicureans cultivated a communal life, deliberately insulated from political affairs, which they thought were psychologically disruptive. The Cynics flagrantly rejected conventional values, and their nominal founder Diogenes of Sinope was the first to speak of himself as a *cosmopolitês*, that is, a citizen of the world, precisely because he renounced ethnic ties and civic obligations.

While philosophy after Socrates was reconceived as fundamentally ethical and a way of life, subsequent philosophers and schools reintegrated physics into philosophy. This reintegration was motivated by the view that in order to understand wellbeing and the human good it was necessary to understand human nature, and in order to understand human nature it was necessary to understand nature and the cosmos. Thus, conceptions of wellbeing varied among philosophers and schools depending upon their views of nature and the cosmos.

Furthermore, insofar as Parmenides had on epistemological grounds criticized his predecessors' preoccupations with nature and cosmology, the study of nature itself had to be buttressed by epistemological theory. Thus, the reintegration of physics into philosophy was also accompanied by the reintegration of epistemology in general, and not merely the epistemology of ethics.

During the Hellenistic period, a conception of philosophy as consisting of three parts, *ethika*, *physika*, and *logikê*, crystallized. Ancient physics, conceived much more broadly than modern physics, included much of what in the Early Modern period was called natural philosophy. Indeed, the Greek word *physika* simply means "things of nature." Likewise, logic (*logikê*) included epistemology and semantics as well as what we call logic. Finally, ethics (*ethika*) included political science and aspects of psychology as well as ethics. In short, ancient philosophical schools and their general positions can be clarified and contrasted in terms of their basic answers to three questions: "How do we know the cosmos?" "What is nature of the cosmos?" and "How do we achieve wellbeing within the cosmos?"

## **VII. Some Basic Principles of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism**

In the limited space available, it is not possible to explain how the various ancient philosophers and schools answered the three questions presented at the end of the preceding section. It is possible, however, to sketch some of the answers they supplied and to provide some sense of their interrelations. In this discussion I will focus on Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, and specifically on their conceptions of wellbeing in relation to their cosmologies.

The word "cosmos" (*kosmos*), as used in Greek cosmology, requires a point of clarification. "Cosmos" refers to an ordered and unified material world. In Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism, there is only one such world, ours. This consists of the earth, sun, moon, five planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn), and the so-called fixed stars (most prominently the stars in the zodiac) of the celestial sphere (the sphere encompasses the cosmos and turns about the poles). In Epicureanism, an infinite number of worlds exist because there is an infinite quantity of matter in the universe. Furthermore, in Platonism, Aristotelianism, and Stoicism, the cosmos is not identical to the universe, but a proper part of it. For Plato and Aristotle, there exist super-physical entities; in Plato's case, so-called Forms and mathematical (on which more shortly); in Aristotle's case, god. The Stoics' position is complicated by the fact that they recognize a third kind of ontological status distinct from existence and non-existence, which they attribute to things such as space and time. Setting aside this complication, however, for the Stoics, as for Plato and Aristotle, the cosmos is wholly material. Precisely, void does not exist in the cosmos. In contrast, Epicurus posits both matter and void as the two basic cosmological principles. Furthermore, for Epicurus, matter is atomic, and all other bodies are composed of aggregates of atoms. For Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, matter is an-atomic or continuous. Thus, bodies are composed, not by aggregation, but by blending or mixing. Finally, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic cosmologies are teleological. In other words, this world is designed or normatively ordered. For Epicurus, worlds are non-teleological.

I said that Plato recognizes Forms and mathematical as super-physical entities. Platonic Forms are akin to universals; however, they are more accurately conceived as abstract particulars, of which material instantiations are imperfect imitations. For example, consider the class of horses as a natural kind. For Plato, there exist, on the one hand, the set of physical horses and, on the other hand, the immaterial Form Horse, which is something like the perfect, ontological formula for being a horse; in other words, the concept of horse, except that a Form is not a mental entity. (In St. Augustine's Christianization of Platonism, Forms become ideas in the mind of god, and this may be a helpful device for conceptualizing the notion of a Platonic Form.) Note, then, that Forms play both an ontological role, that in imitation of which particulars are the kinds of things they are and have the properties they do, and a normative role, paradigms of kinds or classes into which particulars and specifically the natural world is organized. It is controversial how broad a range of Forms Plato admits. Forms of natural kinds are central to his conception, but he seems to recognize Forms of artifacts, as well as a wide range of properties, including axiological properties. For example, there are Forms of Justice and Beauty. In addition, Plato recognizes mathematical as the mathematical objects that are the correlates of the non-mathematical entities that are Forms. Mathematics include numbers and geometrical objects. In contrast to Forms, mathematics are not unique. For example, there is only one Form of Human-Being, but there are an infinite number of mathematics of the Number Two and the Shape Circle. The reason for this distinction of mathematics from Forms is that it is supposed to explain mathematical truths, for example, the arithmetical truth that two twos equal four and the geometrical truth that the diagonal of a square divides two equal triangles.

Aristotle repeatedly criticizes Plato's ontological "separation" of Forms from sensible particulars. For Aristotle, Forms are— with one important exception— immanent in sensible particulars. But Aristotle also maintains that god is an immaterial, immutable being. Moreover, Aristotle's conception of god is essentially equivalent to Plato's conception of Forms. That is, Aristotle's god is, more or less, identical to the set of Platonic Forms.

As materialists, Epicureans and Stoics are, epistemologically, empiricists. In contrast, both Plato and Aristotle maintain that there is no knowledge of sensible particulars. Rather, Forms are the objects of knowledge. Note, however, that experience may still play a role in epistemic progress; indeed, for Aristotle it crucially does, since, with the exception of god, Forms are immanent in sensible objects. Nonetheless, when achieved, knowledge is not of sensible particulars.

For Plato and Aristotle, wellbeing is identified with the full development and exercise of reason, the distinctly human psychological capacity. Realization of reason is, precisely, in the case of Plato, knowledge of the Forms, and, in the case of Aristotle, contemplation of god. Given that Platonic Forms are divinities, these positions, again, largely coincide. Indeed, in the Neoplatonic synthesis of, above all, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, philosophy itself is conceived as assimilation to god.

For Epicureans, wellbeing is identified as pleasure; but pleasure is here conceived not as sensual stimulation, as for instance it is among the Cyrenaics, but principally as the psychological state of tranquility or freedom from disturbance (*ataraxia*). The Epicureans maintain that humans are, normally, fundamentally plagued by fear of death and the alleged vengeful activity of the gods. Such fears in turn engender irrational desires,

which cause further harm and suffering. Epicureans argue that the soul, which is an aggregation of atoms, disintegrates after death and thus cannot be subject to sensation, let alone suffering or pain. Moreover, the gods, if they exist, must be in a state of tranquility and thus must be unconcerned with human affairs. Understanding and appreciating these facts of nature fosters a state of tranquility and enables one to have rational desires, which in turn corroborate freedom from disturbance.

For the Stoics, wellbeing is, as they put it, living in accordance with nature. To explain this pregnant phrase, it is necessary to say a bit more about Stoic cosmology. For the Stoics, the cosmos is a single, living being. This being has two aspects, somewhat misleadingly called matter and god. Both, in fact, are corporeal. However, matter is inert, passive, and non-rational, while god is active and rational. God pervades matter. Thus, the cosmos as a whole is, in a sense, identical to god. The cosmos proceeds through an eternally recurring series of events, whose periods conclude or begin, as one may have it, with conflagrations, that is, events in which the cosmos is wholly consumed by fire. Insofar as the events of each cycle are wholly determined by divine design, the Stoics regard human freedom as extremely limited. Indeed, they emphasize that the only thing over which we have power is our evaluation of events. Furthermore, the Stoics regard virtue, which they also view as identical to wisdom or understanding of the cosmos, as the only good. Possession of virtue enables one to be correctly disposed toward worldly events. Living in accordance with nature is, thus, living with the correct understanding of the cosmos and so of what is in our power (our evaluations) and what is not (everything else).