

The Shift in Research Priorities of the Later Greek Philosophy

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Abstract: The later Greek philosophy existed during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. These philosophical thoughts saw new changes in a new social history context, and this change was mainly manifested in the decline of natural philosophy and its ethical overtones. This paper explores the specific reasons for this shift, starting from its social roots. The paper provides an in-depth analysis of the manifestations of ethicalisation by taking the philosophy of Epicureanism and Stoicism as examples to deepen the reader's understanding of this general trend and explicitly analyses the differences and commonalities between different schools of the ethical philosophy. The paper also explores the academic values and historical influences of the later Greek philosophy in the long history of philosophy. The author argues that interpreting the causes and significance of the shifts in philosophy will not only help to sort out the development of Western philosophy, but also bring inspiration and significance to the development of philosophy today.

Keywords: The Later Greek Philosophy, Ethicisation, Epicureanism, Stoic school

1. Introduction

In the field of philosophical studies, it is common to delineate Late Hellenistic philosophy as the period from the death of Aristotle in 322 B.C. to the closure of all the academies of Athens by order of Justinian, Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire, in 529. This period goes through two significant historical periods: Hellenistic and Roman. However, since the Romans were not skilled in discernment and their philosophical thought was a continuation of Greek philosophy, the same schools of thought were prevalent. The later Greek philosophy shows a largely stable and consistent line of thought and has been collectively referred to as the later Greek philosophy [1].

As the last stage in the development of ancient Greek philosophy, Later Greek philosophy has been regarded as lacking in discernment and originality but as a helpless choice and spiritual solace in the face of the suffering and turbulent life of the people, i.e., the so-called ethical tendency. However, no philosophical thought can be evaluated in isolation from its social context. From the Macedonian kingdom to the reign of the Roman Empire, the West was in a period of social upheaval and the disintegration of old political institutions and city-states, and the desire for a better and more stable life justified the shift from an inquiry into natural philosophy to the development of ethics.

This paper will analyze the performance and comparisons of the mainstream philosophical schools of thought during this period by exploring the social roots of the shift in the later Greek philosophical thought to deepen the reader's understanding of the later Greek philosophy.

2. Social Roots of the Transformation of Later Greek Philosophy

The Hellenistic and Roman periods are inseparable from a common theme of the times - military conquest. This theme was also a critical factor in the development of the later Greek philosophy. The influence of military conquest on the later Greek philosophy was manifested in three main ways.

2.1. The Spread of Culture

Firstly, the wars facilitated the spread of culture and communication abroad, making Greek civilization more influential. During the Hellenistic period, Greek philosophy spread to the East as the Macedonian kingdom expanded its territory and eventually occupied Greece. During the Roman period, Greek philosophy spread further into Latin-speaking areas. This led to a reverse penetration of Greek philosophy by Eastern cultures simultaneously as Greek civilization expanded outwards and increased its influence. Under the influence of absolutism, bureaucracy, hedonism, and various mystical and religious cultures of ancient Persia and Egypt, Greek philosophical thought was gradually overshadowed by mysticism while retaining its focus on the man himself. The result was the intrusion of Roman and Oriental pragmatic attitudes and religious beliefs into Greek philosophy and the destruction of the Greeks' inherently intellectual and rational spirit from within through the unnecessary quarrels caused by skepticism and relativism.

The ethics of Stoicism was then tinged with a kind of predestined mysticism. For the Stoics, providence meant that things happened as they were supposed to because everything and everyone was under the dominion of the Logos or God [2]. They advocated an attitude of living one's life in accordance with fate. Hippolytus, a Christian philosopher of the 2nd century AD, compared man's fate under the Stoic school to that of a dog chained to a cart, which he pulls when he wishes to obey; when he does not, he is pulled by the cart [3]. The representative of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus, also put forward the idea of the unity of the divine and the human based on the overflow theory: the soul naturally has a love for God and demands union with him the same love that a virgin has for her noble father [4]. Through the cultivation of virtue, the purification of the soul, and the contemplation of God to a state of ecstasy, the soul can ultimately return to God. This is sufficient to see Hindu mysticism's penetration into late Greek philosophical thought. Even the philosophers of Neoplatonism preached séances, psionics, and astrology, melting Neoplatonism into various religions.

On the other hand, the pleasures ethics of Epicurean philosophy were influenced by Eastern hedonism. However, it was not their intention to promote hedonism and advocate indulging one's desires; the individualistic tendencies of the pleasure-oriented theories of thought do, to some extent, reflect some similarities with Eastern hedonism. These philosophers believed that the body's natural sensations were the most real and that the most apparent sensation was the tendency to avoid suffering, so everyone sought pleasure.

2.2. From a National and Political Perspective

Analyzed from a national and political perspective, the collapse of the city-state system put an end to the democratic political system of which the Greeks were so proud. This profoundly and comprehensively changed the relationship between people and society. The emergence of a unified empire due to the social integration of warfare also caused a substantial shock to the traditional understanding of social relations of people who had lived in scattered city-states. As the world was presented to people in an entirely new way, people's horizons became more open and the way

philosophers thought about society changed. They realised that thinking about human society and about man should be free from the confines of nation, race and territory, and that man was essentially unified. They also began to see and think about conflicts between peoples and races in a holistic way. This shift in thinking was epoch-making.

Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, had proposed the idea of a “world city-state” and a “world citizen”. Based on the cosmic schema of the unity of reason, Zeno believed that rational human beings should live in a unified state, a world city-state that includes all existing states and city-states, so that each individual is no longer a citizen of this or that city-state, but simply a “citizen of the world” [5]. It was no accident that this view arose, since most of the philosophers of this period were born outside Greece itself and lived in a period of unprecedented cultural exchange, the Great Hellenistic period, and it became inevitable to oppose the narrow national superiority and city-state politics of the Greek philosophers of the past. The idea of a “world city-state” prefigured the later emergence of a unified Roman state, and objectively contributed to the expansion and influence of Greek philosophy and culture.

2.3. From the Perspective of Human Society

From the point of view of human society, the social upheaval and the dramatic changes in social relations brought about by war have left the human heart with a strong yearning for a stable life. On the one hand, the successive years of war destroyed the reverence for the sacred. The vast majority of people retreated to a state of family and personal interaction as the core of their existence [6]. The dramatic expansion of the private sphere of existence led philosophers to reflect on a range of life issues, the so-called ethical tendencies. The main goal of philosophy was no longer the pursuit of wisdom, but the pursuit of happiness [1]. The past relationship between the citizen and the city-state was replaced by the relationship between the individual and the world, and philosophy began to focus on the reality of the concrete world, the private domain itself, shedding the philosophical trappings of rational thinking, the philosophical theories of the late Hellenistic era began to become more emotional and dispassionate, and it began to shift from a public political perspective to The question of how to grasp the individual’s place in the world and how to achieve peace of mind and body became the focus of philosophers’ attention and their main interest. In terms of theoretical form, certain objects that had previously been within the scope of philosophical discourse were divided into specific disciplines for practical reasons. In this theoretical context, philosophy became more focused on areas not covered by professional academic research, focusing on the problems of life and developing in the direction of ethics [1].

3. Tendency Towards the Ethicisation of Later Greek Philosophy

3.1. Overview

In the course of human historical development, based on different social backgrounds, ideological traditions, and development needs, philosophers put forward various ideal personalities in order to set up moral perfection for their times and classes, which people could then emulate and pursue, and eventually influence people’s values and lifestyles subtly at the level of real-life [6]. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods, human nature and the inner values of human beings were gradually awakened. As W. Tarn describes in *Hellenistic Civilization*: the later Greeks felt above all that a man was no longer merely a part of his city-state; he was a person, and such a person needed new guidance. There was a loss of interest in the search for discursive questions about the ideal society; what was needed was a practical philosophy that could guide people’s lives in changing circumstances. When people are overwhelmed by many events, it seems futile to try to change history. However, even if

human beings cannot control history, they can at least manage their own lives with some degree of success. So philosophy became increasingly concerned with the more immediate world that belongs to the individual, and reason began to give way to sensibility [2].

There was no substantial progress in natural philosophy in this period. Most of the answers of the schools to the question of the origin of the world were inherited from their predecessors or were merely a thoughtless mixture of various ideas, even retreating to the earlier Greek philosophy, which regarded a single substance as the origin of the world, such as the Stoics' inheritance of Heraclitus' idea of the fire-principle. The discursive excellence of Plato and Aristotle is gone, and the philosophy of solipsism arises [7].

The schools of Dogmatism in this period were Stoicism and Epicureanism, which advocated a focus on the "human" subject. Dogmatism means that one principle must be carried through to the end, applied to the particular so that the truth of all particulars can be known according to this one principle [8]. Moreover, its principle, because it is formal, its principle is subjective; therefore, it is self-consciously subjective. In this way, the subject becomes something that should be cared. Although these systems of thought were contrary to the kind of rational practical self-consciousness of the Romans, such philosophical ideas forced the Romans to retreat from the real world outside to themselves, to seek reasonableness for the individual only from the self, to seek from within a harmony that could no longer be found in the real world [7].

In addition, another dominant philosophical school of thought in this period was skepticism. The late development of Plato's successor, the Scholastics, also resembles skepticism. Unlike solipsism, skepticism was aware of the one-sidedness of such a principle and thus generally considered the principle to be a solipsistic thing. It is a rejection of the one-sidedness of the Stoics and Epicureanism. It denies all definite principles; the result is, above all, that principles cannot be known [7].

The below analyzes the decline of natural philosophy and the development of ethical philosophy.

3.2. Further Analysis

The four primary philosophical schools of Hellenistic period have in common that they all reflect on the private sphere of life through philosophical reflection on the individual spiritual level [6]. Although each of the four primary schools held a different specific philosophical perspective, they were all based on an inquiry into the common goal of the "pursuit of happiness". The Epicureans were committed to an ideal life of what they called "ataraxia", or tranquillity of the soul; the Stoics sought to control their reactions to inevitable events; the sceptics hoped to maintain personal freedom by making no fundamental commitment to ideals whose truth was questionable; and finally, the Neo-Pelagians wanted to maintain the freedom of the individual by making no fundamental commitment to those whose truth was questionable. Personal freedom; and finally, Plotinus, the representative of Neoplatonism, sought to promise the salvation of the world in a kind of mystical union with God. They both wanted philosophy to provide a ground for the meaning of human existence [2].

The following section will analyse each of the two schools of dogmatism as an example of the ethical transformation of their philosophical thought in relation to classical Greek philosophy and will contrast the two. This was an important school of thought in the history of the later Greek philosophy. The sharp opposition between the two schools of thought, Epicureanism and Stoicism, led to the division of the vast majority of intellectuals within the Roman Empire into two camps over the centuries.

3.2.1. Epicureanism

A study of the Epicurean school will have to refer to the famous book *The Nature of Things*. This book seems on the surface to be about the doctrine of atomism; however, while he treats atomism as

a whole as an accurate depiction of the structure of matter, it is a philosophy about man and society [9]. Epicureanism holds that ethics precedes physics and that human happiness is the most important [10]. One must study physics because it frees one from misconceptions and unnecessary anxieties. In other words, this theory of physics taught life a guide on how to get the best possible life and what knowledge one must have to achieve it. At its root, Epicurus, by describing this role of natural philosophy, brought into sharper relief the supreme importance in his mind of those ethical issues which are relevant to society and humanity [11].

The ethics of Epicureanism is known as “hedonism”. Hedonism’s Pleasureism was not the same as gluttony with pleasure, but rather the school of Epicurus denigrated pleasure, indulgence and the human body. In fact, a kind of “asceticism” was prevalent throughout late Greece, which reached its peak with the Neoplatonist Plotinus. Epicurus’s “pleasure” resembles Aristotle’s “happiness”, which he defined as the absence of pain in the body and the absence of disturbance in the soul. In terms of political life, Epicureanism seems entirely hostile to politics and encourages people to avoid it. Epicurus said that we must liberate ourselves from the prison of public affairs and politics, while the Roman poet Lucretius argued that it was better to submit calmly than to rule over others [12,13].

On the whole, this philosophical system emphasises the sensual aspect of the human being, and they advocate the construction of moral principles of personal values according to a sensationalist code that considers the highest good to be a happy life, that is, physical health and peace of mind in addition to a prudent life, and the highest happiness to be static pleasure. With its pleasures tendencies, the Epicurean system of ethics is undoubtedly superior to its atomistic view of nature. However, it is undeniable that Epicurean pleasureism has some defects for which it cannot be blamed, and these are its individualistic tendencies. Its ethics is concerned only with individual pleasure, not social welfare, and the means of achieving individual pleasure have nothing to do with social service or altruistic behaviour. The only happy social life that Epicurus could think of was friendship, and that friendship was merely the pleasant intercourse of the leisurely intellectual class [1].

3.2.2. Stoicism

Similar to Epicureanism, the Stoics as a whole failed to make a significant contribution to areas other than moral discourse. However, a small number of Stoics made a significant contribution to the field of natural knowledge. The Stoics derived their natural philosophy mainly from Heraclitus’ doctrine of fire as the origin of the world and the idea of the Logos and believed in the existence of a universal law that pervades everything in the universe, namely divine reason. This divine reason, as described in the ABC’s of Wisdom: Building Character with Solomon, “pervades every corner of the world powerfully and puts everything in order” [14], is not an immaterial spirit but is exceptionally fiery. Scientific activity, initially seen by Plato and Aristotle as contributing to the promotion of morality, was abandoned by the Stoics, who used it to exorcise superstition. However, otherwise, it was, at best, an amateur pastime.

However, the Stoics and Epicureanism were fundamentally opposed to many significant issues. On the way to achieving peace of mind, for example, the political view held by Epicurus was that philosophers were not concerned with matters of state unless something extraordinary happened. Zeno, the founder of the Stoic school, on the contrary, believed that the philosopher was to be concerned with matters of state unless something prevented him from doing it [15]. That is to say, whereas Epicurus sought to achieve serenity because of internal motivations, Zeno sought to achieve it for external reasons.

The ethics mentioned above were also expressed in the interests of the different political groups they represented. Epicurus, as a citizen of Athens, was faced with the threat of his homeland Athens being under the rule of the Macedonian kingdom and thus took a passive and defiant attitude towards reality. At the same time, the Stoics reflected the interests of the rising Hellenistic upper classes of

the state, committed to breaking up the old traditional city-state slavery and creating a sizeable monarchical slave state, and so advocated philosophical intervention in life and active interest in state affairs. Marco Aurelius, the famous representative of the late Stoic school, was a “philosopher king”. On the other hand, the Epicurean school opposed the Roman cult of the ruler, who worshipped the emperor as a god, and was thus violently opposed by the idealist school represented by the Stoics. Moreover, as Engels pointed out, it was precise that Epicurus developed atheistic materialism in the struggle against the Stoics, the skeptics, the Cyrillicists, and the Cynics while inheriting the atomic materialism represented by De Moscritus [16].

In ethics, unlike Epicurus, who saw happiness as the measure of a happy life, the Stoics saw life “in harmony with nature”, the moral life, as the best life. The universe is an orderly, perfect whole and tends towards a divine purpose, which gives man a place in it, and he should do his best diligently and cheerfully, the only recipe for peace in a world of change and turmoil. In their view, attitudes of disobedience to fate are irrational emotions, which comprise four broad categories: sorrow, fear, desire, and joy. The opposite of these emotions, “rationality”, represented “ataraxia”, even in the face of death. In *The Meditations*, Marco Aurelius says that the rational person should not approach death with irritation, disgust, and fear but instead wait for this natural action [17].

According to Epictetus’ description of the ideal Stoic in *The Enchiridion*, the Stoics’ reason for advocating ataraxia is that they believe that happiness is ultimately a mental feeling; since one cannot control external events, one can only exclude the influence of external events on the mind. Whatever fate, whatever happens in the outside world, the wise man can maintain a smooth and gentle mind [18].

The Stoics and Epicureanism were the dominant philosophical schools of the period, but they had very different fortunes. Whereas the Stoics were welcomed by the ruling classes and their intellectual circles in the Greco-Roman world as a navigating star to “guide the voyage”, Epicureanism was violently opposed by the ruling classes and their intellectual circles, both in Athens and Rome, and was despised by the learned [19]. Moreover, it was always inappropriately compared with its opponents. From the age of science, however, the society which had been poorly based on faith had faltered, and Epicurus won better understanding and greater sympathy.

4. The Impact of the Ethicalisation of Later Greek Philosophy

4.1. Academic Value

The reoriented philosophy changed the way it thought and highlighted its practical value [20]. The way of thinking in Western philosophy can be summarised as “scientism” and “rationalism”. This scientific and rational way of thinking has produced rigorous and profound philosophical systems in the history of Western philosophy, the advanced science, technology, and the industrial civilization of the West. However, this rational way of thinking about philosophy and the quest to turn philosophy into absolute knowledge like science gradually led to the increasing scientific station of philosophy, and the risk of losing the object of study as the territory of philosophy was gradually taken over by science. The later Greek philosophy coincided with a crucial shift from the rational to the irrational, with the Epicurean and Stoic schools appealing to the senses, the skepticism, and the Neo-Platonism of the unity of the human and the divine, all of which were full of science challenges. This shift in the development of philosophy was not appreciated until the modern era when the crisis in Western philosophy and the full development of science brought its value into focus. Instead of a single-minded pursuit of wisdom, philosophy shifted towards the pursuit of happiness, a commitment to healing the woes of the soul, and a greater emphasis on its practical value [20].

The later Greek philosophy embodies the further awakening of the subject’s consciousness and marks the initial establishment of the spirit of the human nature of philosophy. With the development

of early Greek philosophy, people gradually realized that people had questions such as “what is the origin of the world” because they were conscious and could think. However, in the early and classical periods, although this was recognized, the subject of “I” was not explored in depth but remained an “ontological” subject. For the first time, later Greek philosophy turned the center of philosophical attention to the man himself, the value and meaning of life. This paved the way for the theoretical defense of early patristic philosophy.

Later Greek philosophy pioneered a new approach to philosophical research [1]. Later Greek philosophy, and skepticism, in particular, have provided a beneficial approach for later generations. The school of skepticism asserted that everything we are confronted with is not necessarily true and that it is necessary to doubt everything, neither to affirm nor to deny it. This method of doubting everything is also the basis of modern French skepticism, represented by Descartes. The term “epoche” was also used directly by the pioneer of phenomenology, Husserl, in order to achieve an absolute, pure and self-explanatory field of consciousness, which can be seen as the most successful modern application of the ancient Greek method of “doubting everything”.

The waning rationalism of later Greek philosophy left room for the Christian faith to flourish [20]. Early Christianity faced intense pressure from the Roman Empire and the Jewish tradition during its development, so it had to find theoretical support. The patristic philosophers struggled to find strong arguments in Greek philosophical sources that could justify Christianity’s existence. In this sense, Stoicism, mysticism, and Neoplatonism all, to varying degrees, provided the material for the theoretical arguments for what became Christianity as an independent theology. The ethics of the Stoics, with its emphasis on the inner moral life and the transcendence of the soul over the body, was a philosophical theory with a distinctly religious bent. In addition, the Stoic ideas of fatalism, world city-state, and world citizenship also provided theoretical material for the construction of asceticism and universalism in Christian theory, which led people to transcend the limits of their existence and a larger vision of the divine [21]. The great patristic philosopher Augustine, the founder of Christian theology in the Middle Ages and the great mastermind of patristic thought, put forward the doctrine of the Trinity, which was indiscriminately derived from the Neoplatonist Plotinus’ doctrine of the “Emanation”. All these theoretical inheritances and transpositions led early Christianity to break the relative balance between Jewish tradition and Hellenism. At the same time, the advent of the millennia-long medieval age of faith after the fall of the Western Roman Empire began a new phase in the strange union of Greek philosophy and the Christian religion.

4.2. Historical Influences

At the same time, the ethicalisation of the later Greek philosophy had a tremendous historical impact. Misinterpreted as seeking pleasure and fatalism, it corrupted the spirit of Roman rulers, nobles, and ordinary citizens alike. It was a significant factor in hastening the fall of the Roman Empire [20]. When the Romans first interacted with the Greeks, it was clear they felt “more barbaric and rude”, especially after the Punic Wars, when they felt a sense of admiration for the Greeks. After making Greece their province through the Macedonian Wars, the Romans began a massive and poor imitation of Greek culture [22]. During the introduction of Greek philosophy, the highly rational early natural philosophy did not attract the attention of a nation that prized valor.

In contrast, the various schools of ethical later Greek philosophy were welcomed. In particular, the philosophical ideas of the school of Epicurus were distorted by the Romans and used as a plausible excuse and theoretical justification for their indulgent desires and decadent pleasures. It can be said that the Romans were caught in the mire of Epicurean “hedonism”. Montesquieu clearly pointed out that Epicureanism had greatly corrupted the Roman mind and spirit [23]. On the other hand, the fatalism of the Stoics provided the mental and spiritual backing for the pattern of panic of the late

Romans. The Roman Empire, it may be said, was gradually paralyzed and eventually declined by the “negative and avoidant” views of the later Greek philosophy.

5. Conclusions

The closure of the philosophical schools in Athens in 529 AD symbolized the end of later Greek philosophy, but there is a reason why Greek philosophy had declined long before that. According to Aristotle's summary of the nature of Greek philosophy, philosophy originated in difference; it was the free enterprise of philosophers in search of non-practical knowledge, a purely discursive spirit. The superiority of Greek philosophy lay in rational contemplation and transcendental meditation, but this, at the same time, bred the danger of self-destruction. The tide of relativism and skepticism brought about by Neo-Platonism and skepticism in the later Greek philosophy represented the suicide of reason, arguing for denial, preventing the free search for knowledge, and stopping the development of Greek philosophy. The ethicalisation of Epicureanism and Stoicism also risked total collapse as it failed to satisfy the moral aspirations of the people and thus lost its value of existence.

In sum, a series of facts show that during this period, warfare and the fall of the city-states caused significant changes in the original order, rules, and ideas of Greek society. This transformation objectively led to the fact that with its ethical transformation, Greek philosophy gradually lost its vitality and eventually failed to exist as an active ideology. For this reason, Greek philosophy could only preserve its value if it was absorbed into Christianity's emerging ideology and cultural form. However, the ethical transformation of later Greek philosophy and its ethical ideas are still of great historical and scholarly value.

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