

# Integration in Greek Philosophy

## Hellenistic Thought as a Case Study for Emerging Philosophic Methodology

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A particular achievement of Greek philosophers, speaking in the most general sense, was an approach to philosophy as an integrated system of thought. Plato, in contrast to earlier philosophers who had focused primarily on explaining the natural world, wrote not just about metaphysics, or epistemology, or ethics, or politics, but about all of these. Moreover, each particular subject of Plato's thought was connected to and consistent with a wider view of humanity and the world. His view of the realm of Forms was connected to his view of how one should seek the good (as an entity existing in its pure form only in that realm), which was in turn connected to his view of how and by whom a city should be ruled (by those able to attain the closest knowledge of the true good). This approach to philosophy as an integrated system became an implicit model for philosophy. The Hellenistic philosophers who became prominent after Aristotle's death might arguably have been concerned with a different, more individualized view of philosophy than the philosophers of the Classical Period had been, and yet their treatment of the different branches of philosophy as part of an integrated system followed Plato's model. Both Epicureanism and Stoicism, the two leading philosophies of the Hellenistic Period, demonstrate this integration. The two philosophies may have held opposing conceptions of virtue – the Epicureans viewed virtue as a pragmatic means to an end; the Stoics viewed it as *the* end, the goal and the focus of living – but these two philosophies were not limited to their conceptions of virtue. Each was a cohesive, unified, philosophic system. A fascinating exemplification of this lies in the juxtaposition of Hellenistic metaphysical and ethical views: more particu-

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larly, in connections between a view of the gods and a view of virtue.

Both Epicureanism and Stoicism drew such connections. Their separate conceptions of “god” not only influenced, but in some sense *necessitated* their separate conceptions of virtue. This is true in two ways. The first is because followers of both philosophies were advised to imitate the gods. This principle of imitation bound virtue inextricably to divine models. The second is because the premise that underlies each conception of divinity leads, logically, to a particular view of virtue.

The imitation of divine models is an idea propounded by Stoics and Epicureans alike. Epicurus writes, “For the gods always welcome men who are like themselves, being congenial to their own virtues and considering that whatever is not such is uncongenial”. Balbus, a Roman Stoic, puts forth the same view according to Cicero’s *The Nature of the Gods*: “Man has emerged for the contemplation and imitation of the universe; though he is in no way perfect, in a sense he is a fragment of perfection.” For followers of both schools of thought, the concept of divine imitation is an important one.

For the Epicureans, the model to follow consisted of a god detached from human affairs, detached from everything external to himself, floating, infinitely wise, and entirely at peace. Epicurus describes the god, “First, believe that god is an indestructible and blessed animal... Believe of him everything which is able to preserve his blessedness and indestructibility.” Lucretius elaborates, more poetically:

For perfect peace gods by their very nature,  
Must of necessity enjoy, and immortal life,  
Far separate, far removed from our affairs.  
For free from every sorrow, every danger,  
Strong in their own powers, needing naught from us,  
They are not won by gifts nor touched by anger.

The Epicurean god was self-contained, self-sufficient, disinterested, and implacable. He existed in a realm separate from the earth and enjoyed a quiet, eternally pleasant state of being.

Epicurus taught an approach to morality that directly imitated this model. He taught that his followers should pursue, above all, a state of mind free from disturbance: "One [should] refer every choice and avoidance to the health of the body and the freedom of the soul from disturbance, since this is the goal of a blessed life." He taught that they should strive to remove any form of dependency from their lives: "we believe that self-sufficiency is a great good, not in order that we might make do with few things under all circumstances, but so that if we do not have a lot we can make do with few." He taught them to remove themselves from the affairs of society: "The purest security is that which comes from a quiet life and withdrawal from the many." In short, Epicurus taught to his mortal followers the same mental freedom from disturbance, self-sufficiency, and removal from the world that he described in the immortal gods. Epicureans sought to foster divine qualities within themselves.

The Stoics followed quite a different godly-model. Zeno conceived of a god, not removed from the world system, but identical with it, and with the universe as a whole. This god's distinguishing characteristic was not an emotional state (calm contentment), but a state of perfect, ideal rationality. According to Balbus, in Cicero, "The universe is alive, and endowed with consciousness, intelligence, and reason; and the logical conclusion from this is that the universe is God." The Stoics described their god not with images of lonely floating, but of fiery heat. In Cicero: "elemental heat possesses within it a life-sustaining force which extends throughout the whole universe," and slightly later, "...this hot, fiery substance percolates the whole of nature in such a way that it becomes both the forceful begetter and the cause of bringing into existence." This "fire", in the god, was the animating, life-giving quality of rationality.

The Stoic god was not only involved with the world; he controlled it entirely. He deterministically mapped out the movement of its every particle, and wrote the laws of both nature and man. The universe is thus described as a place of perfect regularity. Balbus catalogues in depth the movements of the heavens, and exclaims, "The heavens contain no chance or ran-

dom element, no erratic or pointless movement; on the contrary, all is due order and integrity, reason, and regularity." What is more, the Stoic god plans *according to* the interests of humanity as a whole: "All that is in [the universe] has been provided and devised for us to enjoy; for the universe is, so to say, the shared dwelling of gods and men, or a city which houses both." The Stoic god is civic-minded.

There are scores of parallels in Stoicism between these descriptions of divinity and the Stoic injunctions for human action. Man, like the god, strives, under Stoicism, for perfect rationality, free from emotions that will cloud his judgment. Plutarch writes, in accordance with Stoicism, that virtue is "a certain character and power of the soul's commanding-faculty, engendered by reason, or rather, a character which is itself consistent, firm, and unchangeable reason," and reminds that "passion is vicious and uncontrolled reason which acquires vehemence and strength from bad and erroneous judgment." The same fire of life and rationality which permeates the universe permeates man as well.

Like the god, man is defined by an element of control – even in spite of fate. "By the work of [his] hands [man] strive[s] to create a sort of second nature within the world of nature." Man shapes his own life and surroundings, and in so doing strives for the same perfection that characterizes divinity. A. A. Long describes the Stoic idea that, "if human nature is perfectible nothing short of its perfection can be admissible as the ultimate goal," and writes, "Stoic ethics is an epitome of idealism". Finally, like the god, man acts for the benefit, not just of himself, but of his friends, his city, of all of humanity – for the benefit of the afore-mentioned "shared dwelling of gods and men". The Stoics, according to Long, advocated, "a communal way of life". They emphasized the importance of benefiting others, as the gods benefit humanity.

Both the Stoics and Epicureans had a definite view of the gods that they strove to imitate in their own lives. Yet this is not the only connection between conceptions of divinity and conceptions of virtue. There is also a certain *causal* link between the

two. The premises the Epicurean accepted as *part* of his definition of the gods led him to certain conclusions about virtue. The same is true of the Stoics.

The Epicureans, as we have seen, viewed the gods as detached. They had no role in human affairs, and so had no role in human virtue. Epicurus rejected what he considered to be a false view of the gods as entities of justice, who would punish men for their wrongdoing. Lucretius writes that humans could only have accepted that false view of divinity out of *fear*. He writes:

Let us now think why reverence for the gods  
Has spread through mighty nations and filled cities with altars...  
What man does not quail with fear of the gods,  
With shrinking mind and flesh creeping with terror...  
Lest for some foul deed or contemptuous word  
The solemn hour of punishment be near.

The fear Lucretius describes is the fear that the gods, as the final judges of virtue, will punish men for failing to be virtuous – for committing “foul deeds”.

Epicureanism seeks to excise this fear by denying the premise that has caused it – the premise that the gods are a source of virtue. Instead, the Epicureans described virtue as a practice, which arose by convention because it prevented violence and was thus in the interest of all. Lucretius, describing humanity’s historical progression into civilization, writes:

So things fell back to utter dregs and turmoil  
As every man sought power for himself.  
Then some men taught them to appoint magistrates  
With rights established and the rule of law;  
For mankind worn by a life of violence  
And weakened by its feuds, was ready now  
To yield to the rules of law and binding statutes.

In this description, virtue does not arise from a divine will, but from a practical need. Epicurus, by removing the fear of the gods as a judge of virtue, changed virtue from a divine mandate into a convention. In this vein, he wrote, “Prudence is...the

greatest good. That is why prudence is a more valuable thing than philosophy. For prudence is the source of all the other virtues...The virtues are natural adjuncts of the pleasant life." In other words, the virtues do not come from philosophical principles, but from simple common sense. Virtue, with the stamp of divinity removed, became a pragmatic mechanism.

This meant that the Epicurean concept of virtue was mutable. Take, for example, the virtue of justice. Long and Sedley quote Epicurus: "And even if what is useful in the sphere of justice changes but fits the preconception for some time, it was no less just throughout that time." Also: "Justice was never anything per se, but a contract, regularly arising at some place or other in people's dealings with one another." That is to say, justice has no absolute or objective nature, it is simply a "contract". It is whatever is useful and mutually advantageous to human interaction in a given situation.

Epicurus' defined the gods in a particular way, and in so doing accepted the premise that virtue was not derived from a divine standard. This led him to the view of virtue as a practical convention rather than an objectively defined principle. Because virtue had no divine definition, it had no definition. It changed depending on circumstance. The connection between these two views is an instance of the way the Epicurean philosophy fit together as a system - for the purposes of our case-study, as an integration of metaphysics and ethics.

The Stoic philosophy was in many ways diametrically opposed to Epicureanism, yet Stoicism too evidences a direct link between its metaphysical understanding of the gods, and its approach to morality and virtue.

Unlike the Epicureans, the Stoics viewed their god as not only an arbiter of virtue, but as the standard for virtue itself. See Long and Sedley, where Stobaeus is quoted: "Zeno represented the end [of life] as: 'living in agreement'. This is living in accordance with one concordant reason, since those who live in conflict are unhappy. His successors expressed this in a more expanded form, 'living in agreement with nature'." In other words, since god is equivalent to nature, the Stoics defined virtue as living in

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agreement with nature – living in accordance with god’s perfect conception of morality.

Because the Stoics believed there was an absolute standard for virtue – i.e. god – they believed that virtue was a principle never to be deviated from, which demanded perfection. Again, see a quote from Long and Sedley, this time from Seneca: “Therefore if every thing, when it has perfected its own good, is praiseworthy and has reached the end of its own nature, and man’s own good is reason, if he has perfected reason, he is praiseworthy and has attained the end of his nature. This perfect reason is called virtue and is identical to rectitude.” Virtue, then, is rationality – which, as we have seen earlier, takes its ultimate form in divinity. And virtue is (in theory) perfectible – because it is derived from a perfect standard: god. The Stoics advocated a life devoted to virtue, because they believed virtue had a nature independent of human circumstances, and thus that it was possible to devote oneself to following it consistently. This belief, in turn, came from the Stoic conception of the gods. The Stoics, like the Epicureans, were led necessarily from a view of the gods to a view of virtue.

A fascinating consequence of the view that these two Hellenistic philosophies were integrated systems of thought is that this view allows a comparison between the two philosophies that indicates a kind of basic similarity. Ultimately, both the Epicurean system – the idea that virtue is bound to practicality, because there is no divine standard – and the Stoic system – the idea that virtue is the goal of life, because it is a divinely-determined standard to which one can hold oneself – both of these are derived from another premise, a deeper one, which both philosophies share. This is the premise that aside from god, there is no way to define virtue objectively – that human beings are not able to reach an absolute definition of virtue if that definition is not divinely mandated. The Epicureans believe this. They believe that because there is no divine mandate, virtue is naught but pragmatic convention. The Stoics believe it. They believe that they must act virtuously because there is a divine mandate – because a god has created nature in such a way as to demand it.

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Neither philosophy holds that virtue can be defined in absolute terms if it is independent of god. The historical progression of these early ties between virtue and divinity is a topic outside the scope of this paper. However, noting the consistencies within two disparate philosophical systems allows this broader similarity to emerge.

Stoicism and Epicureanism, if the study of relationships between metaphysics and ethics are any indication, are consistent, integrated systems of thought, following an implicit model for philosophy as a unified whole of divergent branches. That basic model constitutes a significant contribution of Greek thought to the study of philosophy.

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