

HELLENISTIC PHILOSOPHY
REMARKS ON SOME CONVERGING LINES
OF INTERPRETATION

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Hellenistic philosophy appears on the whole as a variegated but persistent form of general reaction against the preceding philosophical classicism, and, in fact, as a significant reversion to archaic conceptual modalities. Under such a perspective, the overall picture of post-alexandrian thought-habits becomes more coherent and meaningful, and divergent tendencies on the surface prove again and again to stem from the same underlying basic trends.

In natural philosophy, the platonico-aristotelian apparatus all but disappears. The absence of the platonic idea or the aristotelian form is eminently striking; nor does final causality fares much better. To phrase it classically, nature is explained by material agencies and passivities alone, and the functioning of the real ἀίτια is suppressed in favour of the workings of the συναιτία. Of course the material factor is impregnated in Stoicism with life and might, is instinct with divinity; but this is precisely where the presocratic world of ideas enters most triumphantly once more into the scene. While the apparently sterner mechanisms of Epicurean physics, themselves the direct heirs of astonishingly insistent lingering antiquarianism in mature classicism, present a world signally bereft of intelligent planning and intrinsic, universal purposefulness, yet thoroughly animated with all sorts of spectres and deities.

It is as if in theology the completeness and unity of the archaic religious experience can no longer be sustained, it being bifurcated into two complementary but unintegrated strands, the one concentrating on the immanent causality exercised by the gods in weaving the cosmic fabric, while the other emphasizing their strongly personal existence and unruffled blessedness. In a world

tired and destabilized, the will to practical action slackens, activity appears incompatible with happiness or care with serenity, and involvement seems a matter of natural necessity rather than of deliberate preference, of entanglement more than of participation. In view of the wealth of throbbing life *organically* held together in archaic world-feeling, and of the struggle of classical awareness to maintain and, if possible, enhance that unity by re-interpretation, both positive hellenistic alternatives appear *strained* and decidedly one-sided, the one with its *Crass pantheistic hylozoism*, the other with its combination of enlightened materialism and homeric religiosity. Yet we do notice, here as elsewhere, a manifest determination to face the problems squarely in their original terms according to the world-experience, full of vigour and immediacy, in a blooming and spirited age, and not to indulge in any sort of socratic despondent rationalizations, whose artificiality, it was felt, lied thinly disguised even under their highly cultivated and complex platonic or aristotelian *wary* and wearisome *versions*.

In Ethics we observe the practical projection of what was discovered to operate in theology. A certain marked aloofness from the affairs of actual life in society, whether *avowed* and cultivated in garden philosophy or *implied* and practised as a result of stoic superciliousness, clearly indicate unwillingness or inability to fully participate in the dense nexus of man's immediate society; we detect in this a certain feeling of abandon and some sense of futility that seem to lie at the core of both epicurean retreat and stoic cosmopolitanism. The dissociation of human well-being from any external contamination, be it even a bodily disturbance, the discovery that happiness resides

in virtue or pleasure, but of such a kind as to be totally immune to all adverse exogenous influence, further, to hold fast by such values not only as obligatory results of theoretical analysis, but chiefly as actual principles of all action, and this irrespectively of whether that postulated state of human perfection has ever been achieved and realized in mankind - all these express simultaneously a disaffection with the then current ways of human society and absolute reliance on the deeper lying cosmic lawfulness, a conscious disavowal of man-induced and man-made correlations in favour of objective associations according to the nature of things.

Wisdom, and a harmonious life of ease, accomplishments and their unimpeded exercise, delight and satisfaction, endowments of natural perfection and their enjoyment in oneself and others within the strict bounds of a close-tied human environment - were for the greek mind quintessential constituents of happiness. But the advent of classical enlightenment undermined the foundations upon which the possibility of their fulfillment depended.

On the ideological level a reaction soon set in. And the platonic endeavour to reconstitute the shattered edifice without abandoning the rationalistic principle, as well as the resulting aristotelian and old-academic highly organized systems, amply testify to the fecundity and power of the expansionist, "constructive", positive motive as against the restrictive and negative, "descriptive" eleatico-socratic elements. But the common experience of the greek world suffered considerable damage and distortion under the impact of that inroad of puristic, demythologized thinking. At bottom, it certainly remained attached to its inalienable factors; while it was obliged to adapt itself

to developments in life's organization and culture that sprang from the opposing principle of enlightenment. The spontaneous, original unity of the required and necessary elements was disrupted. The wise, the beautiful, the good could no longer be normally, so to speak, happy by right, nor could the man of enjoyment in excellence be automatically blessed and contented. On the contrary. Such as by natural grace and human industry moved along paths of archaic virtue would certainly meet increased tribulation, impediment and rebuff, attrition and frustration. To save the reality or idea of the initial combinations, radical and perhaps desperate measures were needed. The Ethics of the two rival, positive sects provided them. The fantastic imperviousness of the stoic, or the secure, accumulated possession of pleasure - fountains on the part of the epicurean, wise man was the answer.

Nor did they stop there. The Garden set a determined face against all presumed knowledge that detracts from the simplicity, genuineness and truth of untwisted experience in a natural condition and setting. The Stoa would, on the other hand, restructure science on a large scale consonantly to principles in tune and with affinity to the archaic mentality; a striking example, outside the strictly philosophical disciplines, is provided by the pneumatic school in Medicine; another offers Pergamene philology with its decided anti-alexandrine stand, where, characteristically, against the formal order imposed on grammar, language and literature by the peripatetically inspired scholars of the Egyptian capital, it espoused in effect the principle of natural growth.

Logic furthermore, this formidable edge of the rationalistic revolution, was reduced by the Epicureans to the barest essentials, while again Stoicism elaborated a thoroughly articulate system conceived as coming closer to the natural processes of thought than the aristotelian formalism: it obviously covered the same given ground but on a markedly different plan and with a widely diverging purpose. Λόγος is similarly made a metaphysical principle, a physical potency; or, alternatively, is altogether withdrawn from the foreground. It is shorn at any rate of its noetic or dialectical emphasis.

In Theory of knowledge both schools ~~championed~~ a healthy acceptance of the general validity of Man-to-World natural correlations: they rehabilitated implicit faith in human responses to external stimuli, and took once more normal, critical experience as cornerstone of theory. The recherché naivety in the andaciously proclaimed epicurean doctrine of perceptual innocence, as well as the sophisticated intransigence of the stoic lucubrations on καταληπτική φαντασία, are eloquent witnesses of what is really at stake, and bespeak the same fundamentally resolution to defend what would have otherwise been obsolete; they in fact seem to prefigure, and, at any rate, parallel, what in latter art was to become affected archaicism. Between cool, elaborate simplicity and pathetic, single-minded preciosity, they well reflect and illustrate the general cultural climate of the period. Nor should provocative stoic paradoxa, or equally astonishing garden deliverances confuse us: what is basically spontaneous, unified and self-adjusted in a pre-enlightenment era, cannot but appear artificial, scattered and biased after it.

With the resurgence of the archaicizing tendencies in hel-

lenistic thought-currents, classical philosophies recede into the background and assume a conspicuously defensive, negative or irrelevant role. We can thus understand the remarkable eclipse of aristotelianism: Peripatos is now chiefly occupied with physiognostical studies and much given to literary or scholarly pursuits; its adherents seem reluctant to move on the grand philosophical scene. As to the Academy, its transformation in the course of a few decades, presents one of the more curious phenomena in the history of Ideas. How can a school of combined abstruse speculation, mythical and poetical tenor, and dialectical expertise appear satisfied with a merely sceptical position, however eloquently and dexterously sustained, and restrict itself to a criticism of positive, especially stoic, doctrine much in the way of those socratically conditioned megarian or eretrian obstractors of Aristotle, must constitute a singular mystery, unless we assume that it was unable to cope with the much stronger injection of archaic naturalism that was requested - unless, to put it anthropomorphically, it was Aristophanes and not Plato that was right about Socrates.

Academic transcendentalism clashed with the robust sense of reality, first hand or evoked, and the paramount demand for immanent idealism so characteristic of Hellenism. Aristotelianism, on the other hand, though detailed and operational in its analysis of the nature of things, including man's world, was conducted with an apparatus and in a manner considered much too formal and rationalistic.

Extra-academic scepticism with its sober ideal of absence in presence, betrays the same distancing from current forms of life and society that is observed in the positive schools of the

period, only without their affirmative content or their presocratic affiliations, and with merely the negative aspect of their underlying common experience of happiness, namely imperturbability of the soul effected not by energetic possession of specific perfections but by abstention, intellectual non-commitment and practical non-involvement. A tired and disappointed age seeks its rest.

Even so, the archaic gnomic injunction λάθε βιώσας, may find its echo in a life-stream rippled only by the minimal and smooth quest for the guidelines of probability and least-resistance; albeit a distorted echo by both over-emphasis and misapplication, as the old adage, quite apart from its religious repercussions and cosmic setting, would fit epicurean relaxed and tranquil relishing of pleasurable goods rather better than sceptic overwrought detachment from sources of annoyance.

The leading and active drives, however, operated differently and led elsewhere. Hellenistic thought appears resolved to revitalize itself by drinking once more from the pristine springs where philosophy was born and first grew; it shows being more congenial to, more at home with, the archaic world; it manifestly wants to come closer to Nature, to be thoroughly reborn in her embrace. That it can only do this with affectation and mannerism, laboured dexterity and effete sophistication, contrived simplicity and bizarre naturalism - is the predicament of a post-classical era. That it can also do this fragmentarily, partially and paradoxically is its fatal fault*.

* The hellenistic period must end with the universal sovereignty of Rome. The syncretistic movements that emerged and strongly affirmed themselves from the first century B.C. onwards, must not be taken as a part, not even as a continuation of Hellenistic philosophy. What followed was in effect the attempt to widen the rationalistic principle in its platonicoaristotelian formulation so as to comprehend anew, re-enfold and fully absorb the entirety of the greek experience, and thus in a sense to reinstate classicism against the challenge of hellenistic thought.