Course C.2-2: Introduction to Greek Philosophy

The course "Introduction to Greek Philosophy" provides a comprehensive overview of more than twelve hundred years of Hellenic thought, from its archaic origins to Late Antiquity. A distinctive feature of the course is that Hellenic philosophy is not approached exclusively from a rationalist perspective; considerable attention is also devoted to its theosophical, mythical and paranormal dimensions.

Three major historical periods and styles of thought can be distinguished within this long development.

The first period is characterized by *Presocratic natural philosophy*, in which the concept of physis, or nature in the process of becoming, occupies a central position.

The second period concerns *classical Attic conceptual-ethical philosophy*, in which thinkers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle place conceptual thought and human conduct within the civic community of the polis at the forefront.

The third period encompasses *Hellenistic-Roman theosophical philosophy*, in which attention shifts towards the cosmic order, the duality between light and darkness, and the soul's mystical return to the divine One.

The emergence of Greek philosophy marks the gradual transition from a mythical representation of reality to the rational reasoning of the logos. Whereas epic poets such as Homer and Hesiod explained events in terms of deities and heroes, the earliest philosophers sought an immanent explanatory principle within nature itself. At the centre of their inquiry was the search for the archē, the primordial governing principle from which all things arise and into which they ultimately pass away.

The Milesian natural philosophers were pioneers in this respect.

Thales identified water as the primordial substance; Anaximander introduced the concept of the apeiron (the boundless primordial principle that governs everything through cosmic justice); and Anaximenes regarded ensouled air (pneuma) as the sustaining force of the cosmos. This early physics was based on a hylozoistic worldview in which matter and life were not separated.

Xenophanes of Colophon responded to these ideas by criticising anthropomorphic conceptions of the gods, while Orphism introduced a strict dualism between the perishable body and the immortal soul.

As natural philosophy developed further, three major currents of thought emerged.

Pythagoras of Samos and his followers combined the Orphic doctrine of the soul with a mathematical cosmology. They maintained that nature is structured according to numerical ratios (arithmos) and pairs of opposites (systoichia).

The Eleatic school, under Parmenides of Elea and Zeno, advocated a strict ontological monism, drawing a radical distinction between pure Being (noēsis) and the changing world of sensory appearance (doxa).

In direct opposition to this stood the mobilism of Heraclitus of Ephesus, for whom nature represented perpetual change (panta rhei), governed by a cosmic logos and symbolised by eternal fire.

To resolve this dilemma, later thinkers developed mechanism. Empedocles posited four elements that are combined by Love and separated by Strife; Anaxagoras proposed infinitely many seeds (homoiomereiai) ordered by a Mind (Nous); and Leucippus and Democritus reduced reality to atoms moving through empty space.

In the fifth century BC, the centre of philosophical activity shifted to Athens, where Ionian speculation was transformed into a form of education directed towards active participation in political life.

The Peloponnesian War brought about a crisis in traditional reverence for the laws of the city (nomos) and for religion. Against this background, the First Sophistic movement advanced a sceptical form of relativism.

Protagoras of Abdera maintained that the human being is the measure (metron) of all things, while Gorgias of Leontini argued that Being is unknowable and incommunicable. The Sophists introduced the opposition between nature (physis) and human convention or institution (thesis or nomos).

This gave rise to an immoralistic conception of power among aristocratic Sophists such as Thrasymachus and Callicles, in contrast to the democratic humanism of Antiphon and Protagoras. Moreover, the Sophists laid the foundations for the Western educational system (trivium: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric), while Prodicus offered a psychological explanation of religion.

In response to Sophistic relativism, Socrates of Athens emerged, employing the dialectical methods of the Sophists to establish an objective ethics. Socrates upheld a teleological view of nature, according to which human nature is purposefully ordered through divine providence (pronoia).

Through his method of dialogue (dialexis), irony, the art of intellectual midwifery (maieutics) and induction (epagōgē), he sought to establish essential definitions of the virtues. His fundamental thesis that virtue coincides with knowledge provided the starting point for classical intellectualism, guided by his inner voice (daimonion). Following Socrates' condemnation to death, his followers went their separate ways.

Minor Socratics developed his legacy in one-sided ways. The Megarian school combined Socratic conceptual thought with Eleatic immobility; the Cynics, under Antisthenes and Diogenes of Sinope, rejected all conventions (thesis) in favour of a minimal ascetic life according to physis; and the Cyrenaics, under Aristippus, transformed Socratic eudaimonism into momentary hedonism.

The intellectual legacy of Socrates reached its full development in the two Major Socratics, Plato and Aristotle.

Plato of Athens brought together the changing world of Heraclitus, the numerical structures of Pythagoras and the conceptual ethics of Socrates in an ambitious philosophical system. Plato maintained that observable reality is merely a changing image of the transcendent world of Forms or Ideas (ideai or eide), which represent true Being (to ontos on).

The soul is immortal and knows the Forms through recollection (anamnesis). In his metaphysics of light, the Good functions as the supreme Form, illuminating both knowledge and existence. These are organised through dialectical synthesis (synagōgē) and division (diairesis).

In the Timaeus, Plato describes how the divine Demiurge orders matter according to the patterns of the Forms, thereby creating a cosmos. This dualism finds its social application in his Politeia (Republic), in which the state is structured hierarchically according to the model of the soul.

Plato's pupil, *Aristotle of Stageira*, sought to bridge the gap between the ideal and the sensory worlds through his genetic method and hylomorphism. He maintained that nature does not consist of transcendent Forms, but of individual beings in which matter (hylē) and form (morphē) constitute an inseparable unity.

He explained coming-to-be and change through the modal categories of potentiality (dynamis) and actualisation or act (energeia or entelecheia). In a living being, the soul is the entelechy of the organic body.

In ethics, Aristotle is a eudaimonist: the human goal (telos) is happiness or flourishing (eudaimonia), achieved by acting in accordance with virtue and the golden mean (aurea mediocritas). Aristotle divided the sciences into theoretical disciplines (physics, mathematics, and theology or first philosophy concerning the Unmoved Mover), practical disciplines (ethics, economics and politics), and productive or poetic disciplines, all underpinned by the logical framework of the Organon.

Following the conquests of Alexander the Great and the decline of the autonomous polis, intellectual life underwent a profound transformation. The horizon expanded towards a universal cosmopolitanism, while the individual citizen simultaneously sought personal philosophical guidance and peace of mind (ataraxia and apatheia).

The Stoa, founded by Zeno of Citium, proclaimed a pantheistic materialism in which the divine Logos of Fire permeates the universe. The wise person must organise their life in accordance with this cosmic order through rational self-control.

Epicureanism, founded by Epicurus in the Garden, followed in the tradition of Democritean atomism. Through a sensualist canon of knowledge, Epicurus sought to liberate humanity from the fear of the gods. The deistic gods do not interfere with the world, while happiness consists in undisturbed tranquillity (aponia) within a community of friendship.

In opposition to these dogmatic schools, *Scepticism* emerged. Pyrrhonism, under Pyrrho of Elis, advocated the complete suspension of judgement (epochē) in pursuit of ataraxia. In the New Academy, Carneades developed probabilism, or reasoning based on probability, while sceptical physicians such as Sextus Empiricus formulated systematic modes of argument (tropes) in support of a purely empirical medical science.

In Late Antiquity, the confrontation between the philosophical schools culminated in various forms of eclecticism and syncretism, in which Posidonius of Apamea and Philo of Alexandria played key roles. Philo the Jew integrated Mosaic revelation with Hellenic philosophy by locating the Platonic Forms within the divine Logos.

Within this framework of cosmic religion and astrological theology, the final great synthesis of the ancient intellectual world emerged: Neoplatonism. Founded by Ammonius Saccas and developed into a comprehensive system by Plotinus, it constituted a dynamic philosophical framework.

Plotinus maintained that all reality proceeds, through a process of necessary emanation (proodos), from the utterly ineffable One (To Hen). From the One emanates the Universal Intellect (Nous), which contains the interconnected totality of the Forms. From the Nous arises the Universal Soul (Psychē), which in turn permeates and shapes material nature (physis). Through intellectual and ethical purification (katharsis), the human soul can ascend step by step, ultimately experiencing union (henōsis) with the One through mystical ecstasy.

Within the later Neoplatonic schools of Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus, this speculative mysticism was further enriched by Aristotelian logic and theurgical rituals. In this way, Hellenic philosophy brought its rich tradition to completion with the closure of the Academy of Athens in AD 529.