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Macquarie University  
POL167: Introduction to Political Theory

## Lectures: Philosophy from Aristotle to Augustine

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### Lecture: Hellenistic Philosophy

This course is an introduction to political theory by way of a history of ideas about politics, and these ideas are of course related to ideas concerning ethics, religion and other fields.

So in this lecture I want to make some comparisons between the writers we have been concerned with so far, and then say something about the history of ideas, and general history, of the period between these writers and the next one we will read, Augustine.

Thucydides gives a certain representation of what leading men among the ancient Greeks thought politics was about - competition, success and glory, in debate and in war. Like James Mill and Jeremy Bentham and many others, Thucydides assumes, or his characters do, that human beings are self-interested, that moral ideas have only a slight influence.

Plato provides a contrast with this view of Politics. Socrates is openly critical of Themistocles, Pericles, and Thucydides' other heroes. They did not make Athens powerful. Power is not ability to do whatever you fancy at the moment - the tyrant's power is useless because he does not know what to do with it. True power is the ability to achieve your most important goals. The goal is happiness, a worthwhile life; politics is cooperative action toward that goal. The statesman who really knows what politics is about does not seek his own fame and glory, but the true welfare of the citizens of the state. This requires knowledge of what a worthwhile life is like. Very few will achieve that knowledge, and only after long training and experience. The best state will be one ruled by a few genuine experts on the art of living well. Democratic politics is the struggle for glory and the useless power to tyrannize.

Aristotle's view of politics is like Plato's, only he does not seem so much concerned to change the world. The goal of all we do is happiness - a vague term, he says, and proceeds to give it content in a way which puts happiness out of the reach of large sections of the population. He does not actually say so, but it looks as if the aim of politics is the good life for a minority. His conception of happiness is a development of Plato's as seen in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*: its main element is intrinsically worthwhile activity, well done; so the virtues are needed to make it possible. The intrinsically worthwhile activities include those traditionally valued by the Greeks - courageous acts, generous acts, just acts, etc; also, and most important, intellectual activity -- science, philosophy, thinking, speaking. All this done with friends. This will be a pleasant life, but that is not what makes it valuable - these activities are valuable in themselves, and that is why those capable of them take pleasure in them. The aim of political activity is to establish and maintain cities in which that sort of life can be lived; and doing that is part of that sort of life - politics gives scope for the acts of courage, generosity, justice, etc., which are part of the good life.

As I mentioned, this good life is not attainable by more than a minority. It requires freedom and leisure for the political and intellectual activity in which happiness consists. Tradesmen, slaves, women and barbarians cannot live the good life. Aristotle takes a biological view of things. Nature is a principle of development toward a goal. What is natural is not what is widespread or original, but what you find in the fully-grown and well-developed specimen. If you want to know the goal for human nature, the good for man, look at the life of the upper stratum of Athens, at its best.

I remarked before that in comparison with Plato, Aristotle does not seem as much concerned to change the world. Plato's Academy was a revolutionary club, Aristotle's Lyceum was more like a university (as the Academy probably was by then). Perhaps Aristotle thought that nature could be left to take its course - perhaps it seemed to him that not much of importance could depend on an armed coup by a band of philosophers. Nature does nothing in vain. Aristotle studies nature - this is of course part of the intellectual life in which happiness partly consists. Among other aspects of nature he studies politics - how the different sorts of constitutions work, preserve themselves, undergo change. Aristotle's school produced monographs on 158 different constitutions. Only one survives, on the constitution of Athens; it is a combination of institutional analysis and history. So as well as being a political philosopher, he was a political analyst and historian. He also offers practical advice on

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## Epicureans

According to the Epicureans (named after Epicurus, an Athenian about a generation after Aristotle) the good for man is, indeed, pleasure. By that they meant nothing fancy; just pleasure. But, they said, you are not likely to live a pleasant life unless you practice moderation; the Epicurean philosophy was an argument for a traditionally moral and self-controlled life, recommended as the surest way for most people to live pleasantly. Among the chief and most dependable pleasures are those of friendship. Among the riskiest and costliest are the pleasures of political power and of political life. The Epicureans thought it best, that is, most likely to be and remain pleasant, to live a private, retired, apolitical life, with good friends, seeking pleasure with moderation.

The Epicureans had reassuring words about the gods. They are not envious (cf. Herodotus, III.40, story of Polycrates). They do not maliciously and capriciously spoil the happiness of human beings. They get on with their own happy lives. Why should they trouble themselves about human beings? So there is no need to try to placate them, nothing to fear from them. In ancient times the Epicureans were generally described as atheists, but they did believe in the gods; but they held that we can live as if the gods do not exist (as the gods live as if we do not exist).

They also had a scientific theory, derived from an older philosophy (Democritus). Reality consists of a large numbers of atoms separated by void, full of nothing. These atoms move downwards, but from time to time they swerve (just by chance) and collide, and form complex things, which again dissolve as more movements and collisions take place. A human being is such a thing; death is dissolution, the soul is not (as Plato held) immortal, it is just a collection of atoms, there is nothing left to suffer, so there is no afterlife of which we need be terrified.

## The Cynics

The most famous cynic was Diogenes. He wrote nothing, but was the hero of many anecdotes - maybe he never existed. Or perhaps he was someone else of the same name. Anyway, the point of the anecdotes is to illustrate the idea of living so as to be independent of chances of fortune. Diogenes lived in a tub; he realised that no one really needs a house. One day he saw a slaveboy lapping water like a dog and realised that he didn't need a mug and threw that away. One day he was lying in the park sunning himself, and Alexander the Great with his entourage came up. 'Can I do anything for you, Diogenes?', 'Yes, you can move a little - you are blocking the sun'. Independence of things, also an independent attitude toward people. Diogenes was captured by pirates and sold into slavery; a prospective buyer asks him, 'What can you do?', answer, 'I can teach you to be a good man'. The buyer bought him and set him free, of course, and no doubt took lessons. He would test a prospective disciple by asking him to carry the fish as they walked through the market place - people would back off at the smell, and the test was to see whether you would care about how people would react.

'These people want us to live like dogs'. Hence the name 'cynic', from the Greek word for dog.

## Stoics

The point of being independent and not needing things is so that your happiness will not be destroyed by some accident outside of your control or by the malice of other human beings. The more your happiness depends on anything someone else can destroy, the less freedom you have - you are vulnerable to threats. In late antiquity many people felt insecure; governments were tyrannical, there was a lot of illegal violence, people died suddenly of disease or poison or through witchcraft or the malice of the gods. According to Aristotle, happiness consists primarily in worthwhile activity, but it does have some need of the goods of fortune. 'The good is something of one's own, that cannot easily be taken from one' (E.N., I.5, 1095 b25). The Stoics, wanted to find something that could not **possibly** be taken away. Yet they did not want to live 'like dogs'. The solution is this: The good is to live in accordance with reason, and the power to do this cannot be taken away. Our external circumstances may be the result of accident or the malice of others, but whether we act rationally given the circumstances is up to us. As for physical things, it is in accordance with reason to use them when they are available and useful, but not to become attached to them so that their loss causes distress. Possessions do not make you vulnerable unless you become attached to them. To live in accordance with reason is the Stoic conception of the good for man. The Stoics seem to be aware of Aristotle, borrowing and changing his ideas.

Tyranny, slavery, freedom were important concepts in Stoic thought (see Epictetus). Freedom is not poverty, it is being able to give up external possessions and external freedom without distress. According to the Stoics the essential human freedom is inward: the ability to give or withhold assent to representations (thoughts) that come before my mind - to assent or not to the representation that something is so, or that the act it represents is to be done, or that the state of affairs represented is a good or an evil. I can always withhold my assent to such a representation - that is a power that cannot be taken away. I

cannot prevent the removal of these things as evils. Someone living perfectly in accordance with reason would feel the pain and least undue emotion is to be repressed.

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No one lives perfectly in accordance with reason: the 'wise man' is an ideal. The wise man is happy, i.e. is in possession of the good, no matter what happens to his possessions or body, because he would refuse to regard as really an evil anything but failure to act in accordance with reason. (The Stoic paradoxes - 'the wise man is happy on the rack', or in the bull of Phalaris: he feels the pain, and cries out, but knows all the time that this is not an evil.)

When Demetrius the city-sacker came upon the philosopher Stibo emerging from the flames of his city in which his wife and children had just died, he asked 'Did you lose anything?' Answer: 'No, all I possessed I have with me': meaning by this, Seneca says (Letter 9), 'the qualities of a just, a good and an enlightened character, and indeed the very fact of not regarding as valuable anything that is capable of being taken away.'

What does the wise man do when he is acting in accordance with reason? His actions aim at the same sorts of things as other people aim at, but he does ordinary things differently. According to the Stoics human beings all begin by seeking food, drink, and other things relating to self-preservation, but may come to make it a goal to seek these things 'in accordance with nature' or 'in accordance with reason'. This may become the over-riding goal (see Cicero, *De Finibus*, III.vi.21), so that we will endure the loss or frustration of the original self-preservation goals rather than do anything contrary to nature - i.e. would rather die than do anything contrary to nature. Seeking the original goals in accordance with nature or reason means seeking them in accordance with the individual's place as a part of the larger whole - of the human race, of the whole universe. Nature, for the Stoics, as for Aristotle, is a functional whole, with each part assigned its special role. Perhaps we can interpret the phrase 'act in accordance with nature, or reason' as 'act in accordance with the rules of morality', understanding that morality spells out the role human beings have to play in the system of nature. (The Stoics held a 'natural law' conception of morality.) So the Stoic seeks the same sorts of things as everyone seeks, but in accordance with the rules of morality; and his overriding goal is to act that way - if he does not attain the things he seeks, but has sought them properly, then he has all the same attained his goal.

According to the Stoics, actually to attain external things is not part of the good; the good is wholly to seek such things rationally. In Aristotle we can always substitute the term 'goal' for the term 'good' used as a noun - anything we aim at is a good, in Aristotle's terminology; but not in that of the Stoics. To express the point that the overriding goal is to act rightly even if we do not attain the things action aims at, the Stoics restricted the term 'good' to the goal of acting always in accordance with nature and would not apply the term to the things action aims at; they said that these things were 'to be preferred', but not that they were 'good'. Thus to stay alive is to be preferred, and the Stoic's actions will aim at keeping him alive, but not at any cost - only when that can be done in accordance with reason. Staying alive is not part of the good, though it is to be preferred. The good is something which cannot be taken away, as your life can be; the good is independent of outward circumstances; the things action aims at are not independent, but to act in accordance with reason is wholly within our power, and that is the good. The Stoics could perhaps have said that the ethical good is to act rightly, while success is good in some other sense; but to call both sorts of things good might suggest that they can be added together or subtracted - that right action with success is more good than unsuccessful right action. On the contrary, if a person always acts as he should as part of the larger whole - the human race, the universe - then his life is perfectly good, even if his outward circumstances are such that he does not achieve what is preferable. If his life is perfectly good, then he is happy - even if what he tries to do is not achieved.

The Stoics did not, like the Epicureans, seek security in the quiet, apolitical life. Stoic doctrine encourages political activity even in difficult circumstances. Even if success is improbable, the Stoic will engage in political action if that is the right thing to do. Of course reason may suggest that where there is little chance of doing any good in politics it would be better to turn to something else; but while political action seems for any reason to be his duty (e.g. to bear witness to principles or values), the Stoic will engage in it without being put off by lack of success. 'The wise man does not pity, but he helps' (i.e. he does not allow himself to become upset, since that would impede action, but helps in an unemotional way). Politics is one way of helping the human race (recall Plato's philosopher coming back down into the cave). Stoics sought political power, as other people did, but were resolved to use it rightly, in accordance with reason. Reason itself may dictate compromise, tact, avoidance of confrontation, etc.; but when it became clear that further compromise will do no good (rather, will not lead to anything 'preferable'), the Stoic will with equanimity lose his power and even his life.

According to the Stoics reason permits suicide, when there is no good to be achieved by living on. Socrates was one of the heroes of the Stoics: 'You are mistaken, my friend, if you think that a man who is worth anything ought to spend his time weighing up the prospects of life and death. He has only one thing to consider in performing any action - that is, whether he is acting rightly or wrongly, like a good man or a bad one' (*Apology*, 28b).

So Stoicism provided a doctrine of conscientious, principled, flexible, and resolute action in politics, in the face of danger.

In politics, as in ethics, freedom should be understood in the sense of doing and saying what one pleases (parrhesia, freedom of speech in the sense of outspokenness); under a tyrant, those who are prepared to fail. But in this sense are monarchs but not tyrants. Outward freedom is 'to be preferred', but is not essential to the good life. External enslavement cannot destroy the freedom everyone has to give or withhold assent and to live in accordance with reason. Whereas the good life as Aristotle conceived of it could be lived only by someone with freedom and leisure, not by slaves, artisans, women, barbarians, the Stoics taught that anyone can live the good life now, wherever he or she may be, and can continue living it no matter where - on the rack, in the bull of Phalaris.

For more on the Stoics see A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy* [B/525/.L66], and A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 [B/505/.L66/1987]; E.V. Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (B/528/.A7); R. MacMullen, *Enemies of the Roman Order*, chs. 1 and 2 (Harvard, 1966) [DG/78/.M33]; M.T. Griffin, *Seneca, a Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford, 1976) [PA/6675/.G75]

## Sceptics

According to the Stoics it is always in our power to withhold assent from a presentation (thought). They said that a wise man will never assent to anything that may be false. This led to attempts to formulate a 'criterion', some characteristic possessed by presentations which truly represent reality and not possessed by illusory presentations. The Stoics' attempts to formulate such a criterion were effectively criticised first by members of the Academy and afterwards by the Pyrrhonists. There is nothing about any presentation that would enable the person having it to decide whether it was true or illusory. You can seek other impressions, and compare them, but you cannot tell whether those others are true or illusory, or whether a whole set of consistent impressions is consistently illusory. According to the Pyrrhonists, all presentations are relative to the person having them - they depend on the state of his sense organs, on the position from which he is looking, on the state of the light, on his being a human or another sort of animal, on his being Greek or barbarian. The presentation is always relative to, conditioned by, one of those standpoints or circumstances, and there is no way anyone can get above all of these and look at the world as it absolutely is, to compare it with how it seems to us, to see whether it really is as it seems. They applied this line of argument also to moral matters; customs and opinions about morality vary from one culture to another, moral judgments are all culturally relative; see Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* III.xxiv, 'What is the So-Called Art of Living?'

So the practice of the sceptics ('seekers') is to suspend judgment. If (as the Stoics say) the wise man affirms nothing but what is certain and cannot be wrong, then he can make no affirmations and must suspend judgment: or, some of them said, he may affirm what seems to him, but only as what seems to him, not as something certain. This is enough for practical purposes. The sceptic acts on what seems to him to be the case, without affirming that it really is so - whether it is he can never know. The Greek word for a doctrine or teaching is dogma; the Stoics were a dogmatic school - not meaning pig-headed, but simply philosophers who make affirmations. Were the sceptics also, despite themselves, dogmatic, in affirming that nothing should be affirmed, in claiming to be certain that nothing is certain? No, they replied, we merely say that it seems to us that nothing is certain, and that nothing should be affirmed as certain, though some things are good enough to act on.

On the sceptics see Long, and Long and Sedley, cited above; also M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat and J. Barnes (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism* (B/525/.O68); M. Burnyeat (ed.) *The Sceptical Tradition* (B/837/.S56). On scepticism see Kilcullen, *Sincerity and Truth: Essays on Arnauld, Bayle and Toleration* [B/1824/.A864/.K57], essay IV, 'The ethics of belief and inquiry'.

## Followers of Plato and Aristotle

Besides Epicureans, Cynics, Stoics and Sceptics, there were still Aristotelians, generally called 'Peripatetics', and various sorts of Platonists, generally called Academics. The Academic school became sceptical, and a breakaway group who rejected scepticism and wanted to revive Plato's doctrines called themselves the Old Academy; in fact their doctrine was not pure Plato but a combination of Plato with parts of Aristotle. Later there developed a school of Platonists which called itself not Academic, but Platonic - scholars now call it Neo-Platonic - which combine Plato's doctrines with other parts of Aristotle's.

Augustine recognises the (neo-)Platonists as closest to the beliefs of Christians, especially because they were not materialists (as Epicureans and Stoics were), but held that there are immaterial or spiritual realities (recall Plato's Theory of Forms); see *City of God*, VIII.5-.

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