



The Beginning of Hellenistic Philosophy Frederick Mayer

THE POLITICAL SETTING

It is worth noting that after Aristotle philosophy greatly declined. There was a like decline in the field of politics, when the empire which was created by Alexander was split into several fragments. Alexander occupies almost the same position in political life that Aristotle holds in philosophy.

It was the ideal of Alexander to develop a world empire in which Greeks and Orientals could live side by side. Consequently, he encouraged intermarriage and respected the traditions and the customs of the Oriental nations. During the last years of his life he was so deeply impressed with the East that many of his close followers deserted him, for they thought he was betraying his original ideals. They were justified in their suspicions by Alexander's wild excesses. Given to all kinds of vice, he ruled with Oriental pomp and ceremony and regarded himself as a god who could do no wrong. Constantly, however, he was lenient in his treatment of Athens, and he aided in beautifying and extending the glory of that city.

The death of Alexander was followed by several wars, during which there was incessant struggle for power. After the battle of Ipsus, in 301 B.C., four rulers emerged: Lysimachus, who was king of Thrace and of the western part of Asia Minor; Cassander, king of Macedonia, who claimed complete control over Greece; Seleucus Nicator, who governed Syria and whose realm extended to the Indus; and Ptolemy, who was ruler of Egypt and also laid claim to the sovereignty of Palestine.

Ultimately, however, the kingdom of Lysimachus collapsed, and it was divided among the Syrians and the Macedonians. The other nations, including Pergamum, were more fortunate, and their rule lasted until Rome established its great empire. These kingdoms were agencies of culture diffusion. Through them Greek ideas, Greek art, and Greek philosophy were spread to all parts of the civilized world. Thus, the Hellenistic Age arose, which had a distinctly cosmopolitan and universal flavor.

INTELLECTUAL TRAITS

The Hellenistic Age witnessed a reaction against metaphysics. Its primary concern was ethical. No attempt was made to see life as a unity and to investigate the entire structure of the cosmos. It was an age in which an intense class struggle took place. The poor were becoming poorer and the rich, especially at Alexandria and at Rhodes, accumulated more money than ever before.

Of all the cities of the Hellenistic Age, Alexandria was especially splendid. It had enormous zoological collections, a library with several hundred thousand volumes, and a university to which scholars came from all over the world. In Alexandria, noted scientists pursued their labors. Among them we find Euclid, working in geometry; Eratosthenes, in

geography; Apollonius, in physics and mathematics; and Ptolemy, who gave an authoritative formulation of the geocentric hypothesis.

In this age science replaced metaphysical speculation. A positivistic strain predominated. It led to an interest in quantitative measurement and in functional application, and it discouraged a blind faith on the part of the educated thinker. There was such a lively interchange of ideas that no orthodox opinion could last long; instead, eclecticism became the vogue of the day.

To some extent, there was less creativity than before. While the art of the Hellenic Age had been symbolized by gracefulness, restraint, and good taste, Hellenistic art became increasingly more ornate, more bombastic, and more gigantic. Artists were patronized now by wealthy men who wanted to display their possessions and were more interested in impressing their friends than in exhibiting good taste.

In vain do we look for dramatists of the caliber of Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides. The primary interest of this period was comedy. Thus Alenander specialized in domestic situations and avoided difficult cosmic themes. In Hellenic drama, man's relationship with the gods had been foremost. In the Hellenistic Age, however, there was a predominance of comic situations, and the dramatist was primarily concerned with entertaining his audience.

In summarizing, what were the intellectual trends which characterize the Hellenistic Age?

1. A division between philosophy and the sciences took place; learning, as in the 20th century, became increasingly specialized.
2. There was a departure from pure speculation, and there was a concentration on application. More interest was shown in mechanical inventions than was shown in the Hellenic Age.
3. Athens lost its monopoly in learning, and we find new intellectual centers such as Antioch, Rhodes, Pergamum, and Alexandria.
4. Philosophy was popularized, attracting a wider audience. There was a tendency on the part of the teacher to ignore the difficult problems of metaphysics and instead to dwell on social problems.
5. Ethics became the dominant subject of philosophical inquiry. Now the main problem was how man could best achieve a satisfactory life; philosophers were less interested in cosmology than in moral salvation.
6. The spirit of Hellenistic philosophy was eclectic. Attempts were made to synthesize and harmonize conflicting viewpoints. These attempts frequently symbolized a lack of intellectual originality.
7. There arose a host of philosophical scholars who were mainly interested in research and had no independent theories of their own. Their principal interest was academic; as commentators they frequently dwelt on minor and insignificant points of interpretation.
8. Extremes emerged in the intellectual life of the Hellenistic Age. On the one hand, we find extreme superstition; on the other hand, extreme skepticism. In ethics, we find proponents of asceticism and hedonism.
9. In this period philosophy was more closely associated with religion than in the Hellenic Age. Many philosophers gave a symbolic and allegorical explanation of religious phenomena. Like the religious leaders, they frequently resorted to proselyting methods.

10. The perspective of philosophy and literature was narrowed. Since conditions were so chaotic, immediate ends and immediate ideals were regarded as most important. The present was emphasized above all. Intellectual instability was just as evident as it is in the 20th century. There was an unending succession of intellectual fads, all of which claimed to possess new features, but in reality most of them merely borrowed from the contributions of the past.

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