A Comparison and Contrast of Three Ancient Roman Philosophies
by
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Introduction

This paper compares and contrasts three different views of philosophy of Roman times: Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonism. These three philosophies were created out of a need for explanations about the meaning of life. According to Lamm, "Epicureanism and Stoicism, two eminent Athenian schools of philosophy of the third century BC, developed ethical systems that could help individuals feel more secure in an unstable and hostile world. Materialistic and practical, both philosophies suited thoughtful, educated Romans who chose to confront the problems of living an ethical life in a society plagued by dissension, vice, and corruption" (241).

It was the era that sprouted such philosophies. According to Shapiro, “The moral and emotional conditions in the first true ‘Age of Anxiety’ suffered in the western world—the Hellenistic Age—called forth and nourished three great philosophical responses: Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Neoplatonism” (1).

Purpose in Life

This section will compare and contrast the three philosophies regarding the question "What is one's purpose in life?" In Epicureanism, securing tranquility is the answer. The followers of this particular philosophy also believed the highest good in one's life is secure and lasting pleasure. According to Lamm, “Epicurus considered pleasure the ultimate good and adhered, with remarkable consistency, to the consequences of this view” (241). The only way a person could achieve tranquility and pleasure is, as De Lacy says, "through the philosopher. Intelligent choice is also needed, and practical wisdom is more to be prized than philosophy itself. Practical wisdom measures pleasures against pains, accepting pains that lead to greater pleasures and rejecting pleasures that lead to greater pains. It counts the traditional virtues (justice, temperance, and courage) among the means for attaining the pleasant life; they have no other justification" (4).

The followers of Epicureanism also felt that if a person were full of fear and anxiety, he or she would be hindered in achieving her purpose in life. Religion and the dread of death were viewed as the two great sources of fear for mankind. To rid mankind of these fears, De Lacy
Epicurus stated that peace of mind is achieved when the study of natural philosophy has removed all fear of the gods, when death is recognized to be merely the limit of experience and therefore irrelevant to the quality of experience, and when the gratification of desires that go beyond what is necessary and natural is seen to result in greater pains than pleasure" (4).

This brings up an interesting point, one that should be addressed. Epicureanism has been given the reputation of saying that sensual pleasures are the highest good and this is what a person should strive for. This view is actually mistaken. According to Burkhardt, “Intense bodily pleasure has consequences which are painful. In the long run, therefore, the highest good lies not in bodily pleasure but in the maximum of equilibrium or absence of pain” (272). The highest good is not in complete bodily pleasure, but in creating a total balance between pleasure and pain.

How do the Stoics answer the proposed question "What is one’s purpose in life?" They viewed purpose in life as the pursuit of virtue. According to Lamm, “It was seen that virtue was the sole good in an individual’s life; health, happiness, possessions are of no account. Because virtue resides in will power, everything good or bad in a person’s life depends entirely on that person” (242). Lamm goes on to say, “Virtue is seen as a detached calm, and one must guard himself from allowing others from interfering with this calm. One can finally achieve freedom by freeing oneself from all nonimportant desires” (242). We can now see that Stoicism and Epicureanism have a common thread: to achieve ones purpose in life, she must look within. Clark expands on this idea by saying, “to desire the impossible is irrational; and we should concern ourselves only with what is in our power—not wealth, pleasure, or reputation, but our inward reaction to the circumstances of life” (539).

The Stoics also wished to abolish passions, which were thought of as a mental disturbance. According to Sandbach, “The passions came in four generic kinds: fear, lust, mental pain, and mental pleasure” (60). A person who truly followed the Stoic philosophy tried to achieve a detached calm in any situation. This person could have lost his wife and children in a fire, but would take care not to let it disrupt his calm. He would try to view such a circumstance as of no account to him. If he did let it distract him, then he would worry that he was jeopardizing his ultimate goal of achieving virtue.

Last is the Neoplatonic view of one’s purpose in life. This philosophy is somewhat different from Epicureanism and Stoicism. According to Lamm, “The main idea of one’s life is to approach as near as possible to an understanding of reality while on earth so that, upon death, one is fit to enter the City of Good and contemplate the True Reality” (243). In Neoplatonism, there is the belief that nothing exists in its pure form. Pure form is seen as impossible to experience in this life. According to Sweeney, “Neoplatonism tends, then, to put little emphasis on the material universe and reuses all value to the unique, distinguishing characteristics of an individual human person; for Plotinus these are unreal and unworthy accretion and must be put aside when one attains the One” (297). The idea then, is to live this life as ideally as one would live after death. By doing this, a person is more prepared when faced with the True Reality.

God
This section will compare and contrast the three philosophies regarding the question "Is there a God?" De Lacy states, “Epicurus preferred the view, like all other atomic compounds, men have come into being when the necessary conditions have been met. They have no creator and no destiny” (4). It was his belief then that no God did, in fact, exist. But Epicurus was influenced by society's belief at that time that there was a multitude of gods. Even though he himself believed that there was no creator, he devised a way to explain the possibility of the existence of these gods. According to Armstrong, “The gods live in the gaps between the universes. They are peculiar atomic structures, immortal in that the flow of atoms into them exactly balances the outflow” (505). Armstrong explains this state as follows: “Nothing exists but atoms and the empty space in which they endlessly move. Universes, including our own, and all in them are just chance concatenations or chains of atoms, which are always coming into existence and being dissolved infinite space” (505). To compromise his own view with society's, Epicurus further stated that the gods have no power over mortals and do not interfere in our lives or affairs.

In Stoicism there was a belief in God. According to Hallie, “The Stoics defined God as a rational spirit having itself no shape but making itself into all things” (21). Hallie also states, “he key words in the Stoic vocabulary are all basically synonymous: God, Zeus, creative fire, ether, the word (logos), reason of the world, soul of the world, law of nature, providence, destiny, and order. The Stoics were monists. There is no qualitative difference between God and the rest of the universe” (21). In their view then, God is made up of everything; without Him nothing would exist.

Neoplatonists supported belief in a multitude of gods. However, according to Shapiro, “the gods have no power over the universes. They must exist because humans believe in them, but there is no need to fear them. Philosophers can derive peace and joy from contemplating the ideal existence of gods” (334). Therefore, even in their existence, they remain completely separate from mortals. There is a point that does need to be clarified, though. In Neoplatonism there is often the use of the words "The One." This has led many to mistakenly interpret this philosophy as arguing for the existence of God or a Creator. However, according to Dillon, “The One can be defined as a principal superior to Intellect and being, total, unitary and simple” (95). Another way of defining The One is, according to Sweeney, as follows: “The One is cause and final goal that unifies us and our love terminates in it. No one knows for sure what The One is, but it’s beyond being, knowledge, and language” (297). Therefore, The One does not represent the idea of God, but in fact an idea in itself.

Soul

This section will compare and contrast the three philosophies regarding the question "Is there a soul?" In Epicureanism there was the belief in a soul, but it was not seen as living forever. In order to have a clearer picture of this, it is necessary to understand how this philosophy viewed the workings of the body. According to De Lacy, “The human organism is composed of atoms undergoing characteristic patterns of change. Body and soul are interdependent; neither can survive without the other. The soul’s atoms are of four kinds. Three are the same as the atoms that constitute air, wind, and heat; the fourth, the smallest and most mobile, is sui genesis and nameless” (4). Thus it is that the soul is intertwined with the body’s
functions, and has no purpose once the body dies. In this regard, Epicureanism saw religion and the concept of eternal life as a threat. According to Lamm, “Religion was not a consolation but a threat [to Epicureans]; it was a supernatural interference with nature and a source of terror because immortality denied release from pain. Death was both extinction and liberation” (241).

Stoics also believed in a soul. They used the word *pneuma*, which is "breath" or "seed." Pneuma is what we now consider the soul in modern terms. According to Reesor, “The Romans considered the pneuma to be a tensional motion within each entity, a stretching or tightness responsible for the entity’s coherence” (735). Another interpretation of the Stoic's understanding of soul is explained by Clark. He says, “According to a biological analogy that was proposed, the particular things of the world are governed in their emergence and development by the inherent power of seed—sparks, as it were—of the divine reason. The underlying substance of the world, this divine reason, is an intelligent fire that directs all events” (539). Without this pneuma, soul, or fire, nothing would exist.

Neoplatonism also expresses the view that humans have souls. They also believed that the soul continues on after the body dies. Lamm says, “The goal [in Neoplatonism] is to approach as near as possible to an understanding of reality while on earth so that, upon death, one is fit to enter the City of Good and contemplate the True Reality” (243). This illustrates the Neoplatonic view that there is a life after death, which--in this philosophy--is dearly embraced because it frees the soul for better things. Concerning this, Shapiro says, “Plotinus expresses contempt for all that is of sense, blames the commerce of soul with body as entombment, and upholds as a great truth the saying of the mysteries that the soul is here a prisoner” (280).

There is a point that needs clarification, though. Many have confused the use of the word *Soul* in Neoplatonism. According to Dillon, "The Soul is regarded as a level that generates time, and receives the forms into itself as reason principles (logoi). Our physical, three-dimensional world is the result of the lower aspect of the Soul (nature) projecting itself upon a kind of negative field of force (matter). Matter has no positive existence but is simply the receptacle for the unfolding of the Soul in its lowest aspect, which project three-dimensional space” (95). Therefore, the use of *Soul* in Neoplatonism refers to one of the levels of the universe, and not to what resides inside humans.

Conclusion

As we can see, these three philosophies share some common threads of thought, and greatly diverge on others. Though modern technology has proven some of the ideas that held these structures together as incorrect, some we still have yet to disprove. As Hallie says, “Stoics compared their logic to the wall, their physics to the tree, and their ethics to the fruit of a fertile field” (21). This passage holds very true; many wonderful things and ideas have sprouted out of these three philosophies, and many more will surely follow.

Works Cited


