

HIST 101 Western Civilization I
Regent University

Week 3: Greek Civilization

Section 1: Greek Philosophy

Increasingly citizens de-emphasized the role of the gods, magical powers or divine rulers in politics and placed emphasis on human intelligence expressed through community. Community problems, according to Greek thinkers, were caused by human beings and could be solved through human solutions.

The emergence of rational attitudes was not the end of traditional religion. Many people remained devoted to particular gods, cults or religious shrines. Traditional religion did not die out among the Greeks but it increasingly existed alongside of and competed with Greek rationalism—an emphasis on the ability of human reason to explain the world and solve life problems.

For many Greeks, religion became ceremonial. It was not a way of expressing personal spirituality but a way of expressing loyalty to your city-state, which often had patron gods or goddesses.

The changes in Greek culture allowed room for new philosophical outlooks to emerge. Sophism was one of these movements.

Sophists

The Sophists were professional teachers who wandered from city to city teaching the skills necessary for political engagement—especially in a democracy. These skills included rhetoric (persuasive speech), grammar, poetry, gymnastics, mathematics and music.

The Sophists believed that it was useless to think about the first principles—the foundations—of the universe. This kind of knowledge was beyond human grasp. They instead argued for more practical considerations. Individuals should improve themselves and their city-state through civic activities. **Arête** for the Sophists was political excellence—the ability to create laws, policies and have success in public life. Not surprisingly, the Sophists often became tutors to political ambitious people, especially in the democracy of Athens.

Sophists tended to be relativists. No truth, they argued, was universally valid. Keep in mind they believed first principles were beyond human grasp. There were no universal standards. Laws and morality were determined by communities and individual judgment. Sophists challenged the religious traditions and moral values of Athens and other Greek City States. Many sophists contended that religion was the contrivance of man to simply make people obey traditions and laws.

Section 2: Socrates

Socrates (470 BC to 399 BC) lived during the Golden Era of Athens.

Like the Sophists, Socrates believed in applying reason to society and its problems. He agreed that individual and community improvement could come through human efforts.

But Socrates attacked the relativism of the Sophists. Sophists provided skills but not virtue. Socrates wanted to ask bigger questions than the Sophists: What values should humans live by? What makes a good human being?

For Socrates, **arête** was Moral Excellence—the perfection of moral character. According to Socrates, there were objective standards in the world. Those objective standards could be reached through the active use of a person's reason. Moral excellence was achieved when a person lived their life in accordance with these standards. Socrates argued for universal standards of truth and justice.

Click [here](#) to read a debate between the Sophist Hippias and Socrates in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.

So Socrates did not argue for a return to the traditional religions but rather argued that reason was the primary guide. Wrong thinking led to wrong actions. Knowledge would give the ability to do right. Rationality was perhaps the

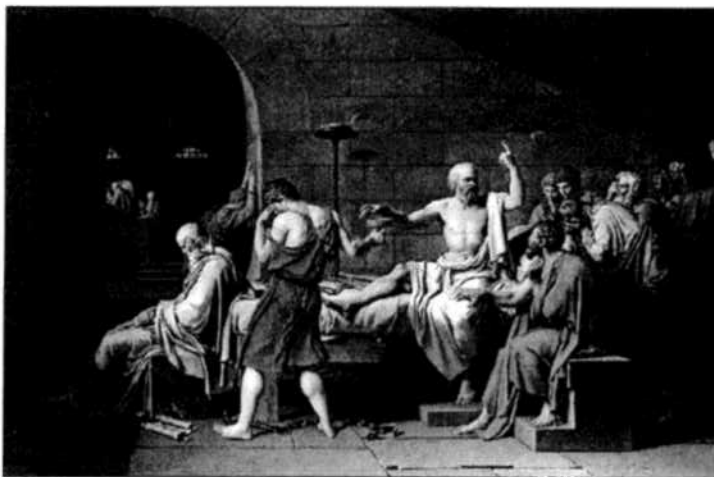
most distinctive part of being human, according to Socrates. The highest form of excellence (**arête**) was "taking control of one's life and shaping it according to ethical values reached through reflection." (Perry 81)

Socrates left no writing or systematic ethical system. He is most famous for his model or method: Socratic Dialogue, or Dialectics. Dialectics is a rational dialogue with another individual or even with oneself. The goal of this dialogue was knowledge. The key to dialectics was thinking through questions rationally.

According to his students who wrote about his life, Socrates spent much of his life engaging people in dialogue. Socrates argued, "No greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day" (Plato's *Apology*).

This eventually led to problems for Socrates. Socrates was arrested at the age of 70 for corrupting the youth of Athens and not believing in the city's gods. Socrates denied the charges; nevertheless, he was found guilty and ordered to drink poison.

Click [here](#) to read a portion of Socrates Defense in the *Apology* by Plato. What is the "good life" (the life well lived) according to Socrates?



The Death of Socrates (Jacques-Louis David)

Section 3: Plato

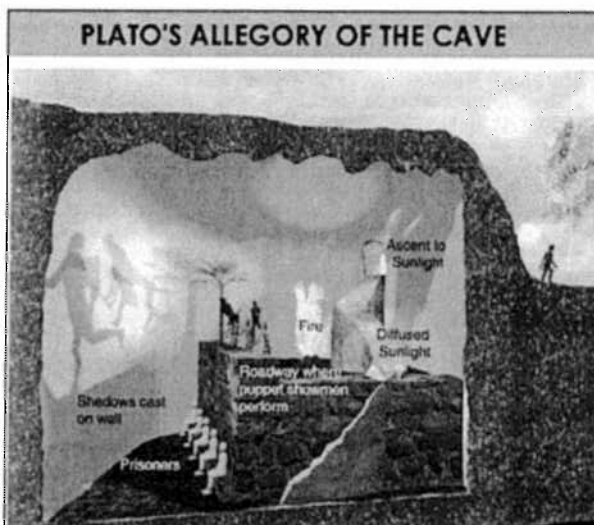
Plato was one of the greatest systematic philosophers of the ancient world. He was a student of Socrates and wrote the major works documenting Socrates' life and teaching. Like his teacher Socrates, Plato argued there were universal and absolute standards of right, justice and beauty.

Plato argued that the existence of a higher reality existed. This reality was a world of **Ideas, or Forms**. These Forms are unchanging, eternal, and absolute. They were the standards of **arête**—excellence. *Arête* was attempting to live life in accordance with these standards—standards for beauty, goodness, justice and truth.

Plato argued that full realization of these standards is usually impossible in this world. For example, a person might not be able to draw a perfect circle but a perfect circle exists in the world of Forms. That is the standard. Perfect goodness and justice might not ever be obtained by individuals but standards of perfect goodness and justice existed in the world of Forms. This is why philosophy was so important. The Forms existed as Ideas. The senses (touch, taste, sight, etc.) could only perceive and examine the imperfect because this world is unstable and imperfect. The philosopher, however, could conceive in the mind the Forms or Ideas.

One of Plato's most famous dialogues is the Allegory of the Cave, in which he explains the Forms. Click [here](#) to read the allegory.

For a visual representation of this allegory, watch this claymation dramatic version.



Section 4: Aristotle

Aristotle studied at Plato's academy in Athens for twenty years. Like Plato and Socrates, he believed that reason/rationality was a person's highest faculty; however, Aristotle modified Plato's beliefs. Plato had little interest in sense perception—that is investigation of things in the natural world. For Plato, philosophical thought concerning the Forms was most important.

In contrast, Aristotle believed study of the natural world was beneficial and important. He agreed with Plato that there were universal principles and standards but much could be learned from studying the natural world. He argued that Plato's belief in another world where the Forms existed was too mystical. Plato focused on reason alone; therefore, he spent more time in philosophy and mathematics. Aristotle argued for the development of empirical sciences—physics, biology and other disciplines based on observation and investigation of data.

Aristotle was very much a Greek in the era of the city-state. He believed deeply that the city state was the primary institution of Greek life. The good life could only be lived within the city-state. For a person to reach their full potential—human excellence (*arête*)—it had to be done in the context of a political community. Like Plato, Aristotle believed that reason should be applied to political life. Doing good for one's city-state, according to Aristotle, was more virtuous than doing good for oneself.

Nicomachean Ethics

One of Aristotle's most influential works is the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this work, Aristotle wrestles with fundamental questions about human existence. What is our ultimate purpose? What is the "good life?" Aristotle argues that happiness is the chief end of humankind. Happiness is always an end in itself. All other activities, according to Aristotle, are a means toward happiness.

Happiness, however, according to Aristotle, is not instant gratification. Happiness is the final goal of the totality of a person's life. It is not merely seeking pleasurable experiences but rather how well you have lived your life. Ultimately, you cannot judge your success until the end of your life. Aristotle argues, "it is not one [bird] or one fine day that makes a spring, so it is not one day or a short time that makes a man blessed and happy." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a18)

What is the key asset in human happiness—reason. Unlike Plato, Aristotle focuses a great deal on studying the natural world. But they come to the same conclusion that reason is the most important part of being a human.

Aristotle had a hierarchical view of nature. At the bottom were the inanimate objects such as rocks. Next came vegetation such as plants. These seek nourishment and life, therefore, they are alive. Above vegetation came animal life. They were higher than plant life because they seek pleasure. At the top of this hierarchy are humans; only humans are capable of living life according to principles, taking responsibility for their actions. The key to this difference is reason. Therefore, if one wants to lead a happy life, that person must live a life in accordance with reason.

Aristotle argued, *the function of man is to live a certain kind of life, and this activity implies a rational principle, and the function of a good man is the good and noble performance of these, and if any action is well performed it is performed in accord with the appropriate excellence: if this is the case, then happiness turns out to be an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.* (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a13)

Unlike instant gratification, Aristotle argued that in order to live a happy life, humans must live life based on moral virtue. He wrote: *"He is happy who lives in accordance with complete virtue and is sufficiently equipped with external goods, not for some chance period but throughout a complete life.* (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1101a10). Unfortunately, Aristotle admits that many people cannot live this way because they are slaves to their immediate desires. He lamented: "the mass of mankind are evidently quite slavish in their tastes, preferring a life suitable to beasts (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b 20)

As you will see with Epicurus, Aristotle argues that friendship is key to living a life of virtue and happiness. This does not mean every friendship leads to virtue. Rather, friendships based on the pursuit of *arête*—excellence—is best. The best friendships are those where the people "are good and alike in virtue."

Click [here](#) to read an excerpt from Book VIII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Consider the friendships that are "not perfect" by Aristotle's standards. Think about how this would apply to people you meet and the type of friendships you form. Is Aristotle right? As the college encourages students to "cherish character" reflect on how friends can influence our growth (or decline) in character.

Aristotle's ethics have often been referred to as the "golden mean" because Aristotle argued that virtue often lay between the extremes of excess and deficiency. Courage for example falls between rashness (not enough fear) and cowardice (too much fear). Benevolence is the mean between giving to people who deserve it and not giving to anyone at all.

Section 5: Greek Art

Greek art was characterized by two things: the belief in universal standards and an appreciation for the individual human experience. Greeks applied the idea of reason and universal standards to art. Greek art was realistic, although often bordering on idealistic.

Sculpture: Greek sculpture attempted to present objects as they were found in nature. For example, a statue should reflect real human anatomy. But Greek art was also idealistic. Statues aspired towards the perfect standard; therefore, a Greek statue was portrayed as flawless without wrinkles or scars. Portrayals of human likeness affirmed that human beings were worthy of dignity and honor.



Architecture: Greek architecture indicated the belief in universal standards and order of beauty and art. For the Greeks, the ideal was harmony and equilibrium.



Literature: Greek poetry and drama often portrayed the sufferings and triumphs of individuals. Greek literature focused on the meaning of the human experience, revealing growing awareness of the individual. Like the Greek philosophers, Greek writers believed in a logic that controlled the universe—Fate or Destiny. The Greek tragedy form brings Fate into sharp focus. In Greek tragedies, an individual struggles against the cosmic forces which eventually crush him. The tragedies revealed the inescapability of Fate but they also affirm individual courage, choice and determination in the face of Fate.

Section 6: The Decline of the City States

Athenian Empire

After the conclusion of the Persian Wars, Athens experienced a Golden Age. During this age of democracy, Athens also became an empire. Athens saw no conflict between imperialism and democracy. They saw it as natural for a stronger state to dominate a weaker state.

For example, the Athenians decided to invade the island of Melos. The Melians resisted. In response, the Athenians killed all the men and sold the children and women into slavery. According to Thucydides, the Athenian envoys told the Melians, "the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept."

Click [here](#) to read the Melian Dialogues.



The Athenian Empire grew out of a naval alliance—the Delian league—which Athens formed with other Greek city-states in case the Persians attempted to re-invade the Greeks. The Delian League was headed by the Athenians. The original members of the naval alliance were those states that had the most to fear from Persian reprisal—western Asia Minor and the Hellespont. Allied states were required to make contributions to the war effort in the form of ships or precious metals. It soon became clear that the Delian League was not voluntary. The allied Island of Naxos attempted to leave the league. The Athenian fleet besieged the island and made the people slaves. More and more states were added to the Delian league. Even as threat from Persia declined, the annual financial contribution was still collected by Athens. Athens began to refer to the allied states as "the cities which the Athenians rule" (Price and Thonemann 120).

By the mid-5th century, Athens had secured naval dominance over the Aegean. Out of roughly 850 Greek city-states, around 250 paid tribute to Athens. It is estimated that 700 Athenian officials were permanently serving overseas—more than 4 times as the officials sent out to administer the provinces of the entire Roman Empire. By the 450's, tribute collected from city states was being used for purely Athenian projects such as the Parthenon.

The Peloponnesian Wars

Sparta and their allies believed that Athens was imperialistic and threatened the traditional independence of the Greek City-States. Relations between Athenians and their Mainland Greek neighbors grew increasingly tense over the course of the 5th century. Relations with Sparta were damaged by diplomatic disagreements. There was an uprising of the *Helots* in Sparta. The *Helots* were the enslaved population of Sparta. Sparta crushed the rebellion but the Athenians settled the surviving rebels in a city-state and acted as their protector. War erupted between Athens and Sparta.

The Peloponnesian War (431-404) was fought on a number of fronts, from Sicily to Hellespont. Sparta fought on the idea that it was bringing "freedom for the Greeks" from Athenian imperialism. The turning point in the war was the Athenian attempt to conquer Sicily (415-413). The Sicilian expedition ended in failure. Athens and its allies lost 50,000 men and 200 ships. The venture cost Athens any hope of defeating the Spartans. Athens was defeated. Though they struggled for 10 more years against the Spartans and their allies, Athens was defeated in 404 BC.

The Peloponnesian War was the great crisis of Greek history. The war shook the foundation of the Greek civilization.

Men brutally killed one another. Cities were destroyed. Captives murdered. Civic duty was no longer the focus of the city-states.

The city-states would never fully recover. While the Greek city states battled one another for domination, a new power was rising to the north—Macedonia.

Section 7: Macedonia and the Greek Empire

The Macedonians were barely considered Greeks by the Athenians and Spartans. Participation in the Olympic Games was a crucial marker of Greek identity. When King Alexander I of Macedonia attempted to join the games in the period shortly before the Persian War, his fellow-competitors objected arguing he was not Greek. He eventually convinced them that Macedonians were Greek descendants but this incident clearly shows that Macedonians—if not quite barbarians—were not entirely Greek.

The Macedonian language was a dialect of the Greek language but it would probably have been hardly intelligible to non-Macedonian Greeks.

Macedonians were considered wild men who spoke the Greek dialect. More important than language, Macedonian culture differed significantly from the Greek-City states. Macedonians were ruled by kings. They were organized into tribe and not city-states. For this reason, the Macedonians and the Greeks saw each other as distinct.



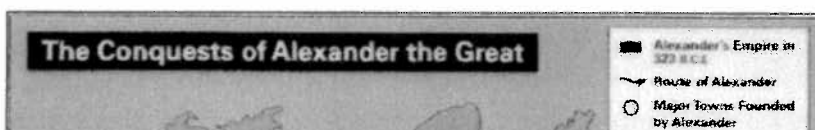
In 359 BC, Phillip II ascended the Macedonia throne and began to turn the state into a military power. Increasingly, Macedonia gained power over individual city-states. The city-states failed to unite against the Macedonian threat. Individual city-states and their small citizen armies were unable to compete against the powerful military of the Macedonians.

By 338 BC, all of Greece was under Macedonian rule. The city-states remained but they were now under the authority of Phillip II. Marvin Perry argues, "The Greeks did not respond to the Macedonian threat as they had earlier rallied to fight off the Persian menace because the quality of citizenship had deteriorated...when people no longer regarded law as an expression of sacred traditions ordained by the gods but saw it as a merely human contrivance, respect for the law diminished, weakening the foundations of the society" (Perry 69-70).

Once Macedonia had conquered the Greek-City states, Philip chose to downplay the cultural differences between Greek and Macedonia. He participated in the Olympic Games in 356 and 348. Rather than impose direct Macedonian rule, Philip established a "Common Peace," enforced by League of Greek states.

Philip emphasized the European character of his nation in distinction to Asia. This allowed him to identify with the Greeks, as he was also a European, but he did not have to state specifically he was Greek. His youngest daughter, born shortly after his victory over the Greek city states, was aptly named "Europa".

Section 8: Alexander the Great



Aristotle had argued that monarchy was only suitable for non-Greeks because they lacked the capacity to rule themselves. Ironically, Aristotle's own student—Alexander—brought an

city-state.

end to the age of the independent

Alexander succeeded the throne upon the assassination of his father, Phillip II in 336 BC. Alexander's overriding focus as ruler was revenge against the Persians. With an army of 35,000 Greeks, Alexander not only conquered all of Persia but pushed on all the way to India. The geographical extent of Alexander's conquests was astonishing. Between 334 and 330 BC Alexander overran Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia and western Iran—the heart of the Persian Empire.

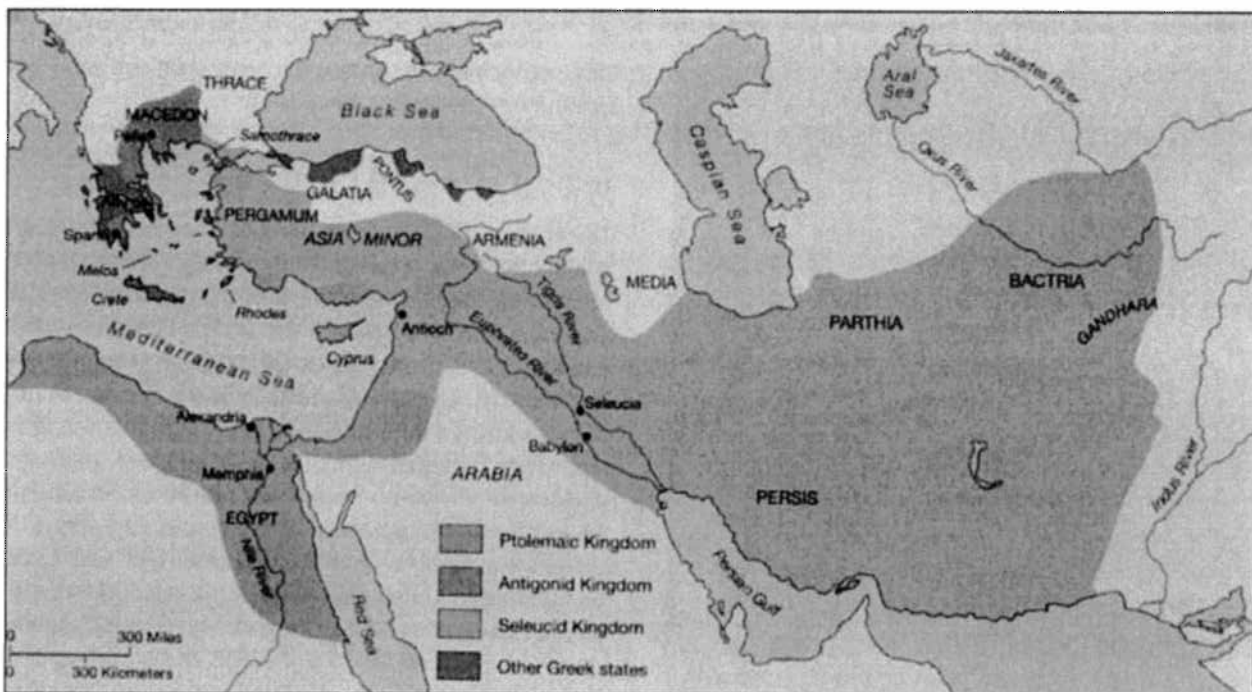
As Alexander conquered, he brought with him Greek culture. Alexander was less narrow than other Greek thinkers and leaders. He broke down the walls of Greek versus non-Greek and was willing to blend Greek culture with Eastern culture. He married a Persian woman. Thousands of Greeks in Alexander's army married Asian women. He incorporated Persians into his army. This cultural interaction and cultural mixing broke down their earlier focus on the city-state. There was a shift from life and philosophy focused on the polis (the city-state) to life and philosophy focused on the **cosmopolis** (the world community).

Alexander's royal court was deeply isolated as the Greek armies pushed farther and farther east. This helped to fuel Alexander's growing sense of paranoia. Alexander had those suspected of plotting against him executed. Increasingly, he began to expect divine honors from his subjects.

By Spring 327, he led his army into the Hindu Kush in India. This was significant because for the first time, he was expanding his empire beyond the boundaries of the Persian Empire. He could no longer claim his campaign was punishment of Persia for the Persian Wars. Eventually, Alexander's Macedonian troops, refused to continue eastward. The long journey back west was marked by "gratuitous slaughter of native populations" (Price and Thonemann 148). In 332 BC, after a drinking party with his friends, Alexander died at Babylon.

Section 9: The Hellenistic Era

Upon his death, Alexander's generals engaged in a long struggle to determine who would rule the empire. By 275 BC, the Greek empire had become divided between three major dynasties: the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in western Asia and the Antigonids in Macedon.



These kingdoms were ruled by Greeks, foreign conquerors. These three Greek kingdoms often vied with one another for territory and power. The style of government of the Hellenistic Kingdoms was not based on the Greek city-state but rather the absolutism of the eastern kingdoms. The Hellenistic kings laid down the law. They presented themselves as gods or representatives of the gods. Statues of the kings were often set up in Temples.

Cities within these empires became centers of Greek culture. Greek architecture, schools, temples and theaters became common. *Koine* (shared language) was a form of Greek spoken by soldiers and administrators. It became a common tongue through the Mediterranean world. It is the language that the New Testament is written in.

While cities were heavily Hellenized, the countryside largely retained older customs and traditions. The segregation between the Greco-Macedonian ruling class and their non-Greek subjects was all but total. A few bilingual Egyptians, Syrians, Persians, etc. could aspire to be clerks, accountants and tax-collectors. But the thousands of royal officials in the Hellenistic kingdoms were Greek or Macedon.

Hellenization (the adoption of Greek culture) in the cities was not always driven from above. In a world where Greekness meant power, there was strong incentive to Hellenize.

Section 10: City-State to World State

The transition from a local focus to a universal focus brought great changes to Greek civilization particularly in philosophy. The Athenian philosophers (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) had been great speculators. They spoke at length about the ideal person and the ideal city-state. They debated at length on political organization and civic duty. Hellenistic philosophers were far more concerned with "providing the individual with practical guidelines for living" with emphasis on achieving happiness in a hostile, competitive and imperial world. Two of the leading philosophies of this era were Epicureanism and Stoicism.

Epicurus: Epicurus founded a school in Athens around 305 BC. Instead of civic virtue, Epicurus argued that to achieve individual happiness a person should withdrawal from civic life. Citizenship was not a pre-requisite for the good life or the achievement of human excellence (**arête**). People achieved happiness when their bodies were free from pain and their minds were free of worry and fear. Epicurus saw the increase of pleasure and happiness as the goal for a human. But he rejected unchecked hedonism. He believed happiness had to be achieved rationally—through the use of reason. For example, heavy drinking or over-eating has unpleasant aftereffects; therefore, it did not help a person achieve happiness. So for the most part, Epicurus argued from moderation. Pursuit of fame, wealth or power would only bring anxiety. People should act justly because unjust actions are burdened with troubles. Love and hate should be avoided. Fear of the gods brought anxiety so Epicurus argued that, while the gods existed, they did not intervene in this world. He especially emphasized the necessity of having a good company of friends to achieve happiness.

Click **here** to read the *Life of Epicurus*. What is the best way to achieve the good life, according to this document? The teachings of Epicurus are also spelled out in three surviving letters from the philosopher. Click **here** to read one of those letters.

Stoicism: Around the time that Epicurus opened his school in Athens, Zeno also opened a school in the city. Zeno's teachings—Stoicism—became the most important philosophy of the Hellenistic world. Stoicism would go on to be highly influential in Roman society as well.

The Stoics argued that the universe contained a principle of order called the Divine Reason/Logos. This was the foundation for all reality and permeated all things. The Logos was implanted in every human soul. This allowed human beings to act rationally and to comprehend the order of nature. Since reason was common to all humans, they were fundamentally connected and equal. Certainly, this was a philosophy geared towards the cosmopolis, not the individual city-state. Greek and non-Greek, rich and poor, slave and free were all under this law of nature or natural law..

Stoics believed that happiness came from disciplining one's emotions by the rational part of the soul. Rationality was key to Stoicism. One wanted to live in accordance with the Logos. Self-mastery was also key. This led to inner peace.

Life's misfortunes would not disturb this person. These were beyond a person's control. Individuals were responsible for their actions but one could not control all of life. Stoics encouraged people to take action in those areas that they would control. To neglect this would bring despair. But they counseled not to try and control what was uncontrollable. This too brought despair.

Click **here** to read *The Enchiridion*. How should one approach life in order to live the good life?

Next Steps:

After completing all the readings for this week, proceed to the *Commentary* section of this course (if needed) and then engage in the dialogue under *Conversation*.

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