

IS HELLENISTIC ERA A DECLINED THOUGHT?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Hellenistic era by determining its fair and unbiased place in the history of philosophy. Unfortunately, in most of the recommended texts of Greek philosophy, that are being taught in Pakistan at the graduate level, the Hellenistic era is declared as a declined thought. But, as a matter of fact, the principal philosophical movements of this era, Cynicism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Neoplatonism paid significant contributions to the fields of epistemology, science, politics, logic, philosophy of mind, rhetoric, and ethics. Against the backdrop of the criticism made by modern historians such as Stace, Hegel, Zeller, and Frank Thilly on the Hellenistic era thereby declaring it a declined thought, this article defends the said era. For this purpose, this paper focuses on the historiographical causes and the onus of responsibility, according to this study, lies on the knowledge revolutions and the dominant knowledge form of a particular era which influence all endeavors of life of that era including historiography too and based on it the biased attitude of historians.

Key Terms: Knowledge Forms, Knowledge revolution, material reality, spiritual reality, science, religion, historiography, biases

Introduction

The in-depth study of the history of Greek philosophy reveals the fact that the Hellenistic era has not been given its proper place. Almost the whole of recorded history has given a partial and one-sided analysis of this era, whereby declaring it a decline thought which, to our understanding is the injustice done to it. As a matter of fact, contrary to the existing views about the Hellenistic era, this era did produce tremendous philosophical thoughts in physics, theology, logic, rhetoric, philosophy of mind, politics, and ethics. The prime objective of the present study is to have an all-encompassing, fully neutral, and comprehensive analysis of the historiography of the Hellenistic era and this process demands evidence about the biases of historians throughout history. It is admitted that the scientific progress after Newton has a great impact on the fields of philosophy, religion, politics, ethics, law, etc. This paper is based on the assertion that the dominant knowledge form has not only an impact on the above-mentioned fields of life but also on historiography. The Hellenistic era is not treated beyond biases. It is also proved from the works on the history of philosophy by modern and pre-modern historians.

Biasness and Subjectivity in Historiography

The importance of the past in order to resolve the current problems is undeniable. Testimony is one of our main sources of knowledge to understand or know the past. So, in this respect, the process of historiography must be as impartial and neutral as possible. But unfortunately, it involves the elements of biases and subjectivity. In the process of historiography, the same event is perceived from different dimensions creating too much confusion to reach the truth. An example of such biased historiography is the texts of Peter Marshall and David Manuel's *The Light And Glory*, Samuel Eliot Morison's, *Christopher Columbus's, The Mariner* and Howard Zinn's *A People's Nation Of The United States*.

Peter Marshall presents Columbus as a key figure in God's grand plan to establish a very special country, unique in the history of the world. While Morison, being a naval officer, appreciates

Columbus' skills as a seaman and he ignores Columbus' act of genocide. Zinn has a different perspective; he thinks that history narrated in national interest ignores the reality that every society includes oppressors and the oppressed. So, to him, history should be regardless of national interests. Zinn portrays Columbus as one who would go to any length to extract wealth from the newfound land. So, these different versions of Columbus' discovery of America show that history is much more subjective. However, the minute and critical study of historical shreds of evidence can lead one to objective truth. One of these lenses is to understand history from the perspective of the impact of dominant knowledge forms on all fields of learning.¹

Knowledge Forms and Knowledge Revolutions

Freud in his lecture "The Question of a Weltanschauung" describes four forms of knowledge; Religion, Philosophy, Science, and Art.² In his article, he wants to make it clear that his creation, psychoanalysis, is one among the sciences and neither needs nor could generate, a worldview of its own. But, to him, all these knowledge forms are equal in value because these all have equal claim to be true and every form is at liberty to choose from which it will draw its convictions and in which it will place its belief. This is particularly a superior, tolerant, and broad-minded view but it is simply a fact that truth cannot be tolerant, that it admits no compromises or limitations, that research regards every sphere of human activity as belonging to it and that it must be relentlessly critical if any other power tries to take over any part of it. Of the three powers which may dispute the basic position of science, religion alone is taken to be its enemy. Philosophy is not opposed to science. It facilitates science in three ways.

First, by criticizing and exposing the prejudices, superstitions, and unquestioned assumptions that are in our common sense thinking and are the obstacles to scientific progress. Secondly, by providing a map of the pattern of the existing scientific knowledge and making it clear to the scientists about their position in the wider field of knowledge. And finally, by

refining the methods of scientific investigation with the help of logic and argumentation. Philosophy also facilitates religion. Because both have to do with many of the same things like ultimate reality, the meaning of life, good and evil, immortality, human nature, god's existence, and nature with the difference that the religious beliefs are adhered to in a fairly systematic and fixed manner while in philosophy it works critically. Hence, according to Freud religion is taken to be the enemy of science while Philosophy is not. But About art, he writes, "Art is almost always harmless and beneficent; it does not seek to be anything but an illusion. Except for a few people who are spoken of as being 'possessed' by art, it makes no attempt at invading the realm of reality."³

If we observe history from the perspective of the development and domination of the above-mentioned knowledge forms we find that the dominant form of knowledge of various historical eras has a profound impact on all endeavors of the relevant fields of life including historiography.

Before 500,000 BC we don't have any historical shreds of evidence and the era is of natural history while from 500,000 BC onwards till 10,000 BC are the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras.⁴ And historical records in written forms dated back to 5000 BC. It was the first stage of the development of knowledge or we can say the first knowledge revolution. Here the great civilizations originated like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus, and Chinese, and mythology; the initial form of religion was the dominant knowledge form. The epistemological structure of the said era is based on two spheres of the structure of reality; spiritual and material.

The 2nd knowledge revolution starts around 1000 BC when Religion developed and encompasses all the fields of human life over the globe as the code of life including Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity as the dominant religions in various regions of the world and even survived till today. At the same time, Philosophy developed and dominated Greece, Rome, India, and China. Philosophy then plays an axial role and dealt with all the issues of the human

world, particularly in Greece and China. The two-sphere structure of reality retains in this era also.

The dominance of Philosophy and Religion remains till the 15th Century AD before the 3rd knowledge revolution and the 1st scientific revolution known as the Copernican revolution, under its influence, various movements flourished and strongly impacted human life fields, among these, were the Renaissance, Reformation Capitalism, nation-state, Enlightenment, Marxism, Darwinism, etc. Science is the dominant knowledge form of this era based on which the epistemological structure is one sphere that is material only.

In the 20th century, there was a 2nd scientific revolution and 4th knowledge revolution, Einstein's theory of general and specific relativity brought the paradigm shift of the time which impacted all knowledge domains. It is followed by quantum mechanics, Freud's discovery of unconsciousness, and various movements in linguistics. Here again, the epistemological structure is based on two sphere structures of reality; physical and non-physical.

Historiography of Hellenistic Era; Pre-Modern and Modern

In the history of knowledge, an ideological tension between tradition, identified with religion which is generally regarded as the abstract or spiritual aspect of reality, and science which is based on the material aspect of reality can be seen from the time of Thales to the present. To resolve this tension, testimony is one of our main sources of knowledge. In this respect, the process of historiography must be as impartial and neutral as possible. But, unfortunately, it involves the elements of biases and subjectivity. In the process of historiography, the same event is perceived from different dimensions creating too much confusion to reach the truth. Such a type of subjectivity is also found in the texts of the history of Ancient Philosophy.

Hellenistic thought embraces the period of 500 years from the death of Aristotle to the Roman empire of Marcus Aurelius. It was the era of the 2nd knowledge revolution with two sphere

structures of reality; spiritual and material. All the historical texts written in this era about cynicism are based on the record of biographies of prominent philosophers like Antisthenes, Diogenes, and Crates.⁵ As these philosophers never wrote their thoughts unlike Plato and Aristotle so whatever we know about them is from the works of Herodotus, Plutarch, and Diogenes Laertius mostly of an anecdotal-biographical and sententious kind.⁶ The works of most of the later stoics like Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius etc., skeptics, and Neoplatonists are survived till today. But some of the texts of early stoics like Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Panaetius, and Posidonius were lost and only fragments quoted by later authors have survived.⁷ Among the most important sources about Hellenistic thought are Plutarch, Diogenes Laertius, Cicero, Galen, Sextus Empiricus, Alexander of Aphrodisias, Stobaeus, and Simplicius.⁸ The dominant knowledge forms of Greek and Hellenistic eras are Philosophy and Religion. The philosophers who belonged to both eras believed in two sphere structures of reality; material and spiritual which can be easily depicted from the philosophies of Greek thinkers like Parmenides, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Socrates, and Plato. These thinkers believe in God and life after death or immortality of the soul unlike Aristotle but who believed in the material as well as spiritual aspects of reality albeit for him soul cannot exist without a body and dispersed at the time of death. Diogenes and Epicurus both follow Aristotle's conception that there is no life after death. But for Stoics like Zeno, Antisthenes, Crito, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, God is the soul of the world and the human soul is the part of God, and that is what gives us the ability to reason. The universe is rational and made up of the divine soul and in this orderly universe, nothing happens by chance and freedom lies in our ability to change our attitude towards all events and happenings which are happened according to divine rational principles. Plotinus was the founder of Neoplatonism and he believed in life after death and the immortality of the soul like Plato. To him, the One (god) is the source of everything and we must have to return to the One. He gave the theory of emanation, according to which the nous or divine mind emanates from 'the One' and contains blueprints or ideas of everything which further overflows forming the world's souls. Nous has various levels of activity as

a result of which matter or the physical world is shaped. On the micro level, the human soul is connected to the body giving life to it along with five senses and reason. And the human soul aims to experience the union with 'the One'. Since Hellenistic metaphysics and natural philosophy are based on two sphere structures of reality subsequently putting a firm influence on the historians of this era who accepted the milestones of the great philosophical contributions of the said era. In this context Plutarch's Lives, Herodotus' Histories and Biographies, and Diogenes Laertius' Lives of the Eminent Philosophers are evident.

As far as the historiography of the Hellenistic era is concerned, facts show that the genuine available sources about the Hellenistic era are very few. The main reason for this is that the philosophers belonging to the Hellenistic era were more practical rather than theoretical. Whatever they said they practice it in real life and avoided writing the books, unlike Plato and Aristotle. Hence, the onus of responsibility lies on the Hegelian interpretation of the history of Greek philosophy and the historical criticism of Pierre Bayle. The reason is that Hegel relies wholly on the theories in the form of written works of philosophers and ignores their biographies which are, beyond any shadow of a doubt, one of the main sources of information about the thinkers in general and the only source to understand the philosophical theories of the Hellenistic thinkers.⁹ Because, unlike Socrates, their philosophical theories can only be derived from their biographies which, to Hegel find the least importance. Similarly, Bayle and his followers reduced anecdotal biographical material to a steadily decreasing stock of anecdotes that were believed to be true.¹⁰

The concerns of Greek and Hellenistic philosophers were to know the things and know the first principle which means the principle that underlies and connects different things. The search for the first principle was related to moral philosophy (social and political philosophy) and natural philosophy. In moral philosophy, it was the search to find the first principle of living well and moral behavior while in natural philosophy the focus was to find the principles of nature or laws of nature. In modern

times the term natural philosophy was replaced by science and the natural philosopher as a scientist. The history of natural philosophy and the history of science lies in the same domain till the 1600s. Natural philosophy before enlightenment was based on the Aristotelian conception of final cause or teleology meaning that everything that happens has some purpose to fulfill and it is also vital to know why things came to be in addition to knowing how things and events came to be. After the 1st scientific revolution, this notion of the final cause was rejected on the basis that it is a presumed theory instead of data observed in nature empirically.¹¹ But the underlying principle of science and natural philosophy to discover the fundamental nature of nature is the same. In the early modern era, the worldview is now mechanistic and materialistic, the world is now considered as matter in motion. The two broad schools of thought empiricism and rationalism emerged including various enduring names of Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, David Hume, Kant, and J S Mill, etc. and the historians of philosophy of this era are Russell, Stace, Hegel, Zeller, and Frank Thilly, etc. The most recommended texts of the Greek history that are being taught in the colleges and universities of Pakistan at the graduate level are 'A Critical History of Greek Philosophy' by W.T. Stace, 'History of Philosophy' by Frank Thilly, and 'History of Western Philosophy' by Bertrand Russell, it is pertinent to argue about the subjectivity involved in the declaration of the decline of Hellenistic era.

As Stace writes after giving the historical account from Thales to Aristotle,

"The rest of the story of the Greek philosophy is soon told, for it is the story of decay. The post-Aristotelian is the least instructive of the three periods of Greek thought, and I shall delineate only its main outline "The general characteristic of the decay of thought which set in after Aristotle is intimately connected with the political, social and moral events of the time".¹²

The next famous source of Greek history is of Tilly's work, he writes

"The history of Greek Philosophy after Aristotle is a Story of Continuous decline. During this period there appeared no great

and original systems; thinkers were for the most part satisfied to repeat the opinions of the great classical philosophers, Plato and Aristotle".¹³

Bertrand Russell; the influential modern historian writes

"In philosophy, it includes the foundation of the Epicurean and Stoic schools, and also of skepticism as a formulated doctrine; it is therefore still important philosophically, though less so than the period of Plato and Aristotle".¹⁴

In addition to these texts, other available texts on the history of Greek philosophy also have the same claim about the said era. For instance, Fredrick Mayer in his book *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy* writes clearly about the decline of the said era

"It is worth noting that after Aristotle's philosophy greatly declined.....there was an alike decline in the fields of politics, when the empire was created by Alexander was split into several fragments. Alexander occupies almost the same position in political life that Aristotle holds in philosophy".¹⁵

Hegel in his lectures *The History of Philosophy* argues after describing the dignity of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle that Hellenistic philosophy especially stoicism and Epicureanism are dogmatic.

"In this second period, which precedes the Alexandrian philosophy, we have to consider dogmatism and Scepticism – the dogmatism which separates itself into the two philosophies, the Stoics and the Epicureans; and the third philosophy, of which both partake and which yet differs from them both, Scepticism."¹⁶

C. E. Cassian in his book *An Introductory History of Greek Philosophy* writes that

"After 323 Greece endured two hundred years of political instability until she became a part of the Roman empire and during that time her prosperity and population declined. Inevitably this situation affected philosophy and there are several

marked differences between Greek and Hellenistic philosophy”.

¹⁷

Further, he refers to the Windled Band

"the early period was remarkable for its creative achievements but the latter was concerned chiefly with the criticism and adjustment of previous philosophy so that there was very little original thought and Hellenic-Roman philosophy appears to be only a gleaning of Greek philosophy".¹⁸

Anthony Kenny in his book *Oxford History of Western Philosophy* writes that

"In 323 BC King Alexander died, and Aristotle hurriedly left Athens. As he said, the Athenians sin twice against philosophy. In the following years he died himself and so- according to the practice of too many undergraduate courses- did philosophy, until one Rene Descartes determined to start again....."¹⁹

All these above-mentioned historians are modern declaring the said era as declined thought. It is pertinent to mention here that pre-modern historians like Diogenes Laertius' Herodotus and Plutarch did not have any such assertions about the Hellenistic era. After the 2nd scientific revolution that is associated with the theory of relativity, there is a revival of Aristotelianism in the fields of metaphysics, ethics, and subsequently historiography. Therefore, in the last few decades, the contributions of Hellenistic thinkers are appreciated and recognized.

Conclusion

Considering everything discussed above, it is reasonable to admit that the surviving elements of Hellenistic philosophy for instance Plutarch's *Lives*, Herodotus' *Histories* and *Biographies*, and Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* depict that philosophers belonging to this era were subtle, rational, innovative, practical, and methodologically nuanced. Whereas in the texts on the history of philosophy written by modern historians, the philosophical contributions of the Hellenistic era were unappreciated and the whole era was declared as a declined thought. The reason behind this biased attitude of historians of the modern era is simply science as a dominant knowledge form

which is also characterized as an anti-Aristotelian science of enlightenment. While Hellenistic era was under the influence of both philosophy and religion; material and spiritual spheres of reality, being the prominent knowledge forms based on which the historians of the said era described the contributions of the then thinkers in various fields of life accordingly.

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