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ENGL 210: Ancient and Modern Superpowers

Sec. 007

24 January 2022

RPE

**In an essay of 5 pages, argue for whether you live your life according to a Stoic or an Epicurean philosophical worldview.** Your essay must incorporate quotes or paraphrases from *all* the philosophers we have discussed in class. Your essay must have a creative title that previews your argument.

The importance of philosophy for the ancients

In general, the polytheistic religions of ancient Greece and ancient Rome were orthopraxic as opposed to orthodoxic. While myths were well known as poetic works designed to both teach and entertain, such religions lacked dogmatic beliefs about the nature of the gods, unlike as in orthodoxic religions. Rather, the focus was on appeasing or working with the gods through prescribed notions of worship and sacrifice, as well as through divination or methods of attempting to “read” the feelings of the gods through observation of animal behavior.

Greek and Roman polytheism did not dictate ethics or morals. Standards of behavior were either enforced from above, through the encouraging (or downright mandating) of the practices of the nobility or ruling class in laws, or else people learned how to behave ethically through the study of philosophy, though it was mainly the wealthy who could afford such training. Philosophy as a subject in the ancient world encompasses many subjects that today have broken off from philosophy and exist as different academic fields, including the sciences.

The Hellenistic period in which Stoicism and Epicureanism arose was a period of transition in which Greek military power diminished after the collapse of Alexander the Great’s empire, while Greece became increasingly subject to political control by Rome. Stoicism and Epicureanism both responded to the pre-Socratic and Socratic (through Plato and Aristotle) traditions of earlier Greek philosophy albeit in different ways. One effect of the cultural exchanges between Greece and Rome in this period was the spread of Hellenistic philosophies to Rome, which led to Romans writing philosophical works often in Greek since Greek was the language of scholarship.

Personal examples

The goals of this essay are to show that you understand the basics of these two schools of philosophy and that you can apply them to past, present, and future actions. The use of personal examples helps reach these goals. Consider anecdotes from your own life and then apply your behavior to the classical sources and ask what would Epicurus or Musonius Rufus think about such a situation and how would they have acted? Such examples do not have to have any relevance (such as situations about technologies unavailable in the past) to the ancient world, in fact, it is a testament to these philosophical schools that they can be applied to situations completely unknown in the ancient world given that, while governments and customs change, human nature remains constant throughout history. It is also acceptable to analyze a past ethical decision and decide that your behavior was *not* ethical after considering the matter by engaging with the classical sources.

Religion and philosophy

In general, questions of correct moral behavior or ethics today seem more appropriate ground for religion than for philosophy, most likely given the prevalence of orthodoxic religions like Christianity, Islam, and to a lesser extent Judaism. Therefore, you may find it helpful to discuss whether Stoicism or Epicureanism fits with your religion of choice. Alternatively, if you are atheist or agnostic, consider which school helps justify your status as a non-religious person.

Engaging with the sources

While this essay does not require that the writer choose one side and agree with *every* tenet of that side, nevertheless the writer must identify as an Epicurean or a Stoic. You will have to quote or paraphrase from *all* the assigned ancient sources (Marcus Aurelius, Musonius Rufus, Epicurus, and Lucretius) to choose which philosophy seems to work best for explaining how the world works (or should work). Your engagement with the sources does not have to be balanced, in that you may focus primarily on one philosopher, but you must mention *all* of them.

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| Issue | Epicureanism | Stoicism |
| Providence | The gods are blessed but do not (and cannot) interfere with mankind | The gods are good and can interact with mankind to help men |
| Sex | Romantic relationships in general are to be avoided because being in love compromises your rationality | It is necessary to procreate to live virtuously according to nature, though enjoyment of sex is an indifferent factor and not a requirement, and sex should ideally not occur before marriage |
| Food | A source of pleasure but one should try to be content with little and savor what they have instead of craving what they don’t have  | It exists not for the pleasure of eating but for the nourishment of the body and expensive or luxurious foods do that no better than cheaper fare |
| Politics | Given that politics leads to conflicts over one’s inner sense of peace, being involved politically is to be avoided | Humans are inherently political because they are social animals so being politically involved is necessary, albeit to a different degree for each person in a society |
| Friendship | Among the greatest gifts life has to offer and essential to happiness | A good thing but not required to live according to virtue |
| Pain | To be avoided, except for pain that will lead to greater pleasure later on | An indifferent in that succumbing to pain will not necessarily lead one away from virtue even if one dies |
| Cosmology | The universe is made up of atoms and void or empty space | The universe is made up of fire in various forms |
| Soul | Not in a traditional sense as it is material and made up of atoms and thus is temporary | Physical and permanent, as epitomized by *pneuma* or a fiery breath that represents a person’s uniqueness and monitors the functioning of the body |
| Afterlife | None, instead body and soul are recycled into either void or atoms and death is not to be feared because there is no sensation in death | Beliefs varied but if an afterlife exists there is no reason to live just for the sake of reaching it, also there’s the possibility of reincarnation  |
| The goal of life | *Ataraxia* or consistent inner calmness through pursuing certain pleasures and avoiding certain pains | *Apatheia* or not being disturbed by negative thoughts through pursuing virtue (*arete*) or wisdom, courage, justice, and moderation |

Formatting and Citation

Your essays should be in 12 pt. type and double spaced and should be in MLA format. Your final draft should be at least five (5) full pages double spaced, not including the works cited. Your name should appear on the first page and in the header of every page along with the page number. Please include a Works Cited section at the end of your essay (it does not need to be on a separate page). Your essay should have a title of your own that has something to do with the content of your argument.

Remember to consult the Purdue OWL website for how to cite scholarly sources in MLA format @ <https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/purdue_owl.html>. This assignment requires the quoting and or paraphrasing from the poems in text, as well as in the works cited section.

Due Dates

Rough draft – 1 February 2022

Rough draft feedback – 3 February 2022

Final draft – 10 February 2022

Please submit your final drafts to the submission space on the course Moodle page and your rough draft to the Moodle discussion forums.