



SAMPLE ADMISSION EXAM

Please, write a one-page summary and answer the questions

1. What do we learn about the Greek philosophy from this text?
2. Why is the question of immortality so important?
3. How has the notion of immortality evolved?

Based on the following text from Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*. (Harcourt, Inc., 1977, pp. 129 – 141):

[...] Our question, What makes us think?, does not ask for either causes or purposes. Taking for granted man's need to think, it proceeds from the assumption that the thinking activity belongs among those *energeiai* which, like flute-playing, have their ends within themselves and leave no tangible outside end product in the world we inhabit. We cannot date the moment when this need began to be felt, but the very fact of language and all we know of pre-historical times and of mythologies whose authors we cannot name give us a certain right to assume that the need is coeval with the appearance of man on earth. What we can date, however, is the beginning of metaphysics and of philosophy, and what we can name are the answers given to our question at different periods of our history. Part of the Greek answer lies in the conviction of all Greek thinkers that philosophy enables mortal men to dwell in the neighborhood of immortal things and thus acquire or nourish in themselves "immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits." For the short time they can bear to engage in it, philosophizing transforms mortals into godlike creatures, "mortal gods," as Cicero says. (It is in this vein that ancient etymology repeatedly derived the key word "theorem" and even "*theatron*" from "*theos*.") The trouble with the Greek answer is that it is inconsistent with the very word "philosophy," love of or desire for wisdom, which cannot very well be ascribed to the gods; in the words of Plato, "No god philosophizes or desires to be wise; for he is."

Let me first deal with that strange notion of *athanatizein*—immortalizing—whose influence on the legitimate subject matter of our traditional metaphysics can hardly be overrated. In an earlier chapter, you will remember, I interpreted the Pythagorean parable in terms of judgment, which as a separate faculty was discovered late in the modern age, when Kant, following up the eighteenth-century interest in the phenomenon of taste and its role in aesthetics as well as social intercourse, wrote his Critique of Judgment. Historically speaking, this was quite inadequate. The Pythagorean notion of spectatorship had another and more far-reaching significance for the rise of philosophy in the West. Closely connected with the parable's main point of the supremacy of *theōrein*, of contemplating over doing, is the Greek notion of the divine. According to the Homeric religion, the gods were not transcendent, their home was not an infinite beyond but the

“brazen sky...their sure citadel forever.” Men and gods were like each other, both of one kind (*hen andrōn, hen theōn genos*), drawing breath from one mother; the Greek gods, as Herodotus tells us, had the same *physis* as men; but, though *anthrōpophysis*, of the same kind, they still, of course, had certain privileged peculiarities: unlike mortals they were deathless and enjoyed an “easy life.” Free of mortal life’s necessities, they could devote themselves to spectatorship, looking down from Olympus upon the affairs of men, which for them were no more than a spectacle for their entertainment. The Olympian gods’ feeling for the world’s spectacular quality—so different from other peoples’ notions of divine occupations such as creating and law-giving, founding and governing communities—was a partiality they shared with their less fortunate brothers on earth.

That the passion for seeing, preceding (as we have noted) the thirst for knowledge even grammatically in the Greek language, was the basic Greek attitude to the world seems to me too obvious to require documentation. Whatever appeared—nature and the harmonious order of the *kosmos*, things that had come into being of their own accord and those that human hands had “led into being” (“*agein eis tēn ousian*”) (Plato’s definition of fabrication [*to poiein*]) as well as whatever human excellence (*aretē*) brought forward in the realm of human affairs—was there primarily to be looked at and admired. What tempted men into a position of mere contemplation was the *kalon*, the sheer beauty of appearances, so that the “highest idea of the good” resided in what shone forth most (*tou ontos phanotaton*), and human virtue, the *kalon k’agathon*, was assessed neither as an innate quality or intention of the actor, nor by the consequences of his deeds—only by the performance, by how he appeared while he was doing; virtue was what we would call virtuosity. As with the arts, human deeds had to “shine by their intrinsic merits,” to use an expression of Machiavelli’s. Whatever existed was supposed, first of all, to be a spectacle fit for the gods, in which, naturally, men, those poor relations of the Olympians, wished to have their share.

Thus Aristotle ascribed the faculty of *logos*, reasoned speech, to the Greeks as distinguished from the barbarians, but the desire to see he ascribed to all men. Thus Plato’s cave-dwellers are content to look at the *eidēla* on the screen before them without uttering a single word, unable even to turn to each other and communicate, being chained to their seats by the legs and neck. The many share in the divine passion to see. What was involved in the Pythagorean spectatorship, in the position outside all human affairs, was something divine. And the less time a man needed to take care of his body, and the more time he could devote to such a divine occupation, the closer he came to the way of life of the gods. Moreover, since men and gods were of the same kind, even the divine deathlessness seemed not altogether out of mortal reach; apart from being a constant source of envy, the great name, the precious reward for “great deeds and great words” (Homer), conferred potential immortality—to be sure, a poor substitute. This reward, again, was in the power of the spectator to bestow on the actor. For before the philosophers dealt with what is forever invisible and with what is not merely deathless but truly everlasting, *agenēton*, not only without end but also without beginning, that is, birthless—the Greek gods, as we know from Hesiod’s *Theogony*, were deathless but not birthless—the poets and the historians had been dealing with what appears and, in the course of time, disappears from the visibility of the world. Hence, what was involved, prior to the rise of philosophy, in the notion of a position outside the realm of human affairs, can best be clarified if we briefly examine the Greek notion of the function of poetry and the position of the bard.

There exists a report of a lost poem by Pindar. It described a marriage feast of Zeus, where Zeus asked the assembled gods whether their happy blessedness still lacked something. Whereupon the gods begged him to create some new divine beings who would know how to beautify all his great works “with words and music.” The new godlike beings Pindar had in mind were the poets

and bards who helped men to immortality, for “the story of things done outlives the act” and “a thing said walks in immortality if it has been said well.” The bards also, Homer-like, “straightened the story...in...magic words to charm all men thereafter.” They did not merely report, they also set it right (*orthōsas*)—Aias had slain himself from shame, but Homer had known better and “honored him above all men.” A distinction is made between a thing done and a thing thought, and this thought-thing is accessible only to the “spectator,” to the non-doer.

This concept of the bard comes right out of Homer. The crucial verses occur when Odysseus has come to the court of the Phaeacians and, at the king’s order, is entertained by the bard, who sings some story of Odysseus’ own life, his quarrel with Achilles: Odysseus, listening, covers his face and weeps, though he has never wept before, and certainly not when what he is now hearing actually happened. Only when he hears the story does he become fully aware of its meaning. And Homer himself says: The bard sings for men and gods what the Muse, Mnemosyne, who watches over Remembrance, has put into his mind. The Muse gave him good and bad: she deprived him of eyesight and gave him sweet song.

Pindar, in the lost Zeus poem, must have made clear the subjective as well as the objective side of these early thinking experiences: Both the world and men stand in need of praise lest their beauty go unrecognized. Since men appear in the world of appearances, they need spectators, and those who come as spectators to the festival of life are filled with admiring thoughts which are then uttered in words. Without spectators the world would be imperfect; the participant, absorbed as he is in particular things and pressed by urgent business, cannot see how all the particular things in the world and every particular deed in the realm of human affairs fit together and produce a harmony, which itself is not given to sense perception, and this invisible in the visible would remain forever unknown if there were no spectator to look out for it, admire it, straighten out the stories and put them into words.

To state this in conceptual language: The meaning of what actually happens and appears while it is happening is revealed when it has disappeared; remembrance, by which you make present to your mind what actually is absent and past, reveals the meaning in the form of a story. The man who does the revealing is not involved in the appearances; he is blind, shielded against the visible, in order to be able to “see” the invisible. And what he sees with blind eyes and puts into words is the story, not the deed itself and not the doer, although the doer’s fame will reach the high heavens. Out of this then arises the typically Greek question: Who becomes immortal, the doer or the teller? Or: Who depends on whom? The doer on the poet, who gives him fame, or the poet on the doer, who must first accomplish things that deserve to be remembered? We need only read Pericles’ funeral speech in Thucydides to learn that the question remained controversial, the answer depending on who replied—the man of action or the spectator. Pericles, at any rate, statesman and friend of philosophers, held that the greatness of Athens, the city that had become the “school of Hellas” (as Homer had been the teacher of all Greeks), was for that reason “far from needing a Homer...or other of his craft” to make it immortal; the Athenians by the sheer power of their daring had left “imperishable monuments” behind them on land and sea.

It is the distinctive mark of Greek philosophy that it broke entirely with this Periclean estimate of the highest and most divine way of life for mortals. To quote but one of his contemporaries, Anaxagoras, who was also his friend: when asked why one should choose rather to be born than not—a question, incidentally, that seems to have preoccupied the Greek people and not merely philosophers and poets—he replied: “For the sake of viewing the heavens and the things there, stars and moon and sun,’ as though nothing else were worth his while.” And Aristotle agrees: “One should either philosophize or take one’s leave of life and go away from here.”

What Pericles and the philosophers had in common was the general Greek estimate that all mortals should strive for immortality, and this was possible because of the affinity between gods and men. Compared to other living beings, man is a god; he is a kind of “mortal god” (*quasi mortalem deum*, to quote Cicero’s phrase again), whose chief task therefore consists in an activity that could remedy his mortality and thus make him more like the gods, his closest relations. The alternative to that is to sink down to the level of animal life. “The best choose one thing in place of all else—everlasting fame among mortals; but the many are gluttons like cattle.” The point here is that it was axiomatic in pre-philosophical Greece that the only incentive worthy of man qua man is the striving for immortality: the great deed is beautiful and praiseworthy not because it serves one’s country or one’s people but exclusively because it will “win eternal mention in the deathless roll of fame.” As Diotima points out to Socrates, “Do you suppose that Alcestis would have died to save Admetus, or Achilles to avenge Patroclus...if they had not believed that their excellence [*aretē*], would live for ever in men’s memory, as in fact it does in ours?” And all the various kinds of love, according to Plato’s *Symposium*, are ultimately united by the striving for immortality of all things mortal.

I do not know who was really the first Greek to become aware of the decisive flaw in the praised and envied immortality of the gods: they were deathless (*a-thanatoi*, those who were forever *aiēn eontes*), but they were not eternal. “As the *Theogony* informs us in some detail, they have all been born: their vital duration had a temporal beginning. It is the philosophers who introduce an absolute *archē* or Beginning which is itself unbegun, a permanent and ungenerated source of generation. The initiator here is probably Anaximander, but we can see the result more clearly in the poem of Parmenides. His being is forever in the strong sense; it is ungenerated (*agenēton*) as well as unperishing (*anōlethron*). Limited neither by birth nor by death, the duration of what is replaces and transcends the unending survival which characterized the Olympian gods.” In other words, Being, birthless as well as deathless, replaced for the philosophers the mere deathlessness of the Olympian gods; Being became the true divinity of philosophy because, in the famous words of Heraclitus, it was “made by none of the gods or men, but always was and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, fixed measures kindling and fixed measures going out.” The gods’ immortality could not be trusted; what had come into being could also cease to be—were not the pre-Olympian gods dead and gone?—and it was this flaw in the gods’ everlastingness (much more, I think, than their frequent immoral conduct) that made them so vulnerable to Plato’s ferocious attacks. The Homeric religion was never a creed that could be replaced by another creed; “the Olympian gods were laid low by philosophy.” That the new and everlasting divinity, which Heraclitus in the fragment just quoted still calls *kosmos* (not the world or the universe but their order and harmony), is finally, starting with Parmenides, given the name “Being” seems due, as Charles Kahn suggests, to the durative connotations this word had from the beginning. It is indeed true, and by no means a matter of course, that “the durative aspect, being inseparable from the stem, colors every use of the verb, including every philosophical use.” [...]

*If the sample admission test seems too difficult for you, there is an opportunity to take a **preparation course** for the program Liberal Arts and Humanities. For more information, please follow the link below:*

<http://fhs.cuni.cz/FHSENG-524.html>