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Ancient Greece as a Basis for Europe

Outline of Lecture

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Introduction

Greek achievements stemmed from the basic conviction that there is a perfect, eternal order underlying the whole natural world--in other words, that all nature is a unified and harmonious cosmos, not a chaos--and that this order is intelligible to man's intellect. Greeks thus looked to a naturalistic standard or norm, not a transcendent one as the Hebrews did. Their view of nature as the source of the ideal and normative, however, was different from that of the older myth-making cultures. Greeks believed that the order underlying nature consisted of laws which the mind could best understand; the mythopoeic outlook saw nature as a "thou", personal and alive, to be understood by the emotions and imagination. Europe derived much not only from Greek culture but also from the achievements which resulted from those beliefs, values, ideas, and habits. The Greeks were curious about practically everything and made original contributions in almost every area which interested them.

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1. Three different cultures, three different views of the world and how it is organized. Why? What explains the difference?

2. Both the Greeks and the Hebrews were on the fringe of the dominant societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Does being on the edge explain why the Greeks and Hebrews took off in new directions? If something new develops, will it develop out of the mainstream? And what are the implications of that, if the answer is "yes?"

Frame of Reference

The origins of the Greeks and the early development of their basic beliefs, values, and ideas are still obscure and hotly debated by the specialists. Apparently the first Greek-speaking peoples or Hellenes infiltrated into what is now the modern [Greek](#)

mainland around 2000 B.C. Some of them later developed a civilization there centering on the fortress city of Mycenae, at first being influenced by the older Minoan civilization on Crete and then about 1400 challenging it for leadership of the area around the Aegean Sea. The migrations of Greek speaking peoples continued intermittently, and soon after 1200 a group of these known as the Dorians put an end to Mycenaean civilization. All organized life and skills and older basic values and ideas did not come to an end, but the entire area around the Aegean was reduced to simple, localized life and almost isolated from the influences of the ancient Near East.

In this Dark Ages from 1100-750 the essential elements of Greek culture were formed and the basic features of later classical civilization were set. Some scholars believe that the beginnings of Greek culture are best seen, although indirectly, in works such as [the pottery](#) of the Dark Ages, and in the epic poems of Homer.

According to this view, the beginnings were rather sudden, revolutionary, as reflected in the pottery. About 1050 on the southeastern Greek mainland (the region of Athens) potters first began producing a new style distinguished by [geometric decoration](#) and proportioned, harmoniously balanced shapes. In the tenth century this style spread throughout the Aegean. If the potters who began this new style were giving expression to a new outlook, new concepts, ideas, and values shared by the people for whom they made pottery, then Greek culture was already forming. Both in the geometric designs and in the solid, simple shapes, pottery of the Dark Ages suggests that the Greeks had begun to view their environment and themselves in a new light. Reality was not chaotic but essentially ordered, harmonious and simple. One could depend upon this to the extent that one could shape a part of reality--a pot--to imitate those essential principles. In the relationship between the parts of the pot, in the balance between decorative designs within the overall unity of the pot, and in the restrained and yet varied use of designs, these earliest pieces of [geometric pottery](#) show not only the Greek belief in an orderly world but other elements of Greek culture as well: a tendency to try to grasp the whole,

ideals of balance, harmony and moderation, and the confidence in the ability of the human mind to know and put to use objective knowledge about the world. Perhaps few others shared the confidence these potters did in thinking and acting in a new fashion; the beginnings were simple and tentative. And yet compared to what earlier [Minoan](#) and [Mycenaean](#) artists produced these works were quite revolutionary.

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1. The argument above is that pottery best shows the shift to a new attitude toward reality. Of course pottery is about all that survives from that period. But, forgetting that, do artists or craftsmen first sense the possibility of a new outlook and point the way? What are the implications of that, if true? For example, modern art shows us, what?
 2. The beginnings of Greek culture lie in the ruins of the Mycenaean and the earlier Minoan cultures. Are times of destruction and the leveling of traditional institutions and patterns, fertile, creative times? We don't usually think of those times as good. Should we?
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In the [Iliad](#) the same radical break with the past is apparent. Scholars generally agree that both the mythology and the folk-tales on which the poem was based developed during the centuries of the Dark Ages out of older Mycenaean sources. Early in the eighth century Homer drew these together in the Iliad, although his own contributions are not always clear. Nonetheless, the poem reflects the new Greek confidence in man's position in the world and his relationship to the gods. He lived in an orderly world which was understandable and free of much of the awesomeness and fearsomeness it held in Near Eastern mythopoeic thinking. The gods were rationalized and humanized in their family structure under Zeus and in their separate responsibilities. This basic outlook remained significant until the end of the classic era in the fourth century.

After 750 Greeks seemed to enter upon an age of revolution and expansion. The period down to 500 saw major accomplishments based on the culture which had formed and slowly consolidated across the Dark Ages. An alphabet was modified from the Phoenician one. Greeks expanded cultural contacts with other peoples in the eastern Mediterranean and the west as they carried on a greater volume of trade; colonies were planted in the western Mediterranean and Black Sea area. The beginnings of science and philosophy occurred. Greek artists proved their independent creativity in sculpture, architecture and pottery. In the latter, they went beyond the designs and the shapes of

geometric pottery, so sure had they become of its underlying principles, to the naturalistic [black and red-figure styles](#) made famous by Athenian artists.

One of the most important results of this age of revolution and expansion, an age which laid the foundations for the brilliant classical period from 500 to 323, was the [polis](#) or city-state. It was the context for and the stimulus to the accomplishments rising out of Greek culture. It was also a perfect illustration of Greek values and beliefs. The sense of the wholeness of human life, the feeling for balance and proportion and the faith that man can make intelligible sense of his environment were made visible in a community which harnessed the individual to the group without breaking his spirit and which stimulated the broad range of man's interests from politics to aesthetics.

Physically, the **polis** was a small, self-sufficient, and autonomous urban center with surrounding farm-lands and villages. Mountain ridges and hills tended to separate Greeks and to promote variety and political disunity. During the Dark Ages Greeks were organized in tribes under kings, but in the late eighth century many such groupings changed into city-states controlled by aristocrats. The idea that blood ties united the citizens of a **polis** survived in this transition; one was born into a **polis** as into a family. By the fifth century there were about 200 of these city-states. The major ones, however, were Athens and Sparta. Each was the focus of the whole life of its citizens, but they were so different from each other that they were the extremes of what a **polis** could be.

Located in one of the southeastern parts of the Greek mainland, [Sparta](#) turned itself into an armed camp on a permanent war footing sometime in the seventh century. Only Spartiates enjoyed full rights of citizenship. As an aristocracy they controlled the rest of the population who were either non-voting citizens (*peroikoi*) or semi-free (*helots*). The whole purpose of social institutions and the laws was to maintain the Spartiates as a disciplined effective army which could dominate the Peloponnese. Personal feelings and ambitions were channeled to that end. Spartan thus became the byword for a rigid social order, for personal self-denial and military discipline, all to strengthen the **polis**. By such means Sparta became dominant not only in the Peloponnese but in all the mainland. Not until the fifth century was her primacy challenged--by Athens--and even so she remained the leading power until the fourth century.

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Sparta survived by making itself the most regimented ancient society we know anything about. Are there lessons in Sparta's history?

[Athens](#) developed far differently while Sparta organized itself on a permanent war footing under the aristocratic Spartiates. Already the largest **polis**, Athens moved towards broadly based rule and commercial and industrial supremacy in Greece. The stages by which democracy was established were influenced by the economic development of the city and by two significant reformers, [Solon](#) (638?-?559) and Cleisthenes (fl. 508). Each man had a great deal to do with settling social and political tensions created by the expansion of trade and industry. Their solution was to expand the body of citizens and broaden its powers at the expense of aristocrats. By 500 much of this had been done. Athens had a democratic system in which the whole body of citizens controlled the men who actually governed and many had access to office.

Down to the fifth century Greek culture based on the **polis** had nurtured a broad range of creative activities. All this was but a prelude to the classic era of Greek culture (c.500-323). However, the background to this brilliant age was almost incessant warfare. First came the Persian menace, then the debilitating Peloponnesian war between Sparta and Athens, the challenge of Thebes to Sparta, and finally the conquest of the city-states by the kingdom of Macedon. At least during most of the fifth century, strangely, the fighting seems to have stimulated creativity rather than suppress it, as if the wars brought an outpouring of new energies.

The Persian kings of the late sixth and early fifth centuries considered the Greek city-states around the Aegean and on the mainland a menace to their northwestern frontiers and determined to make them submit. A small campaign in 490 (the battle of Marathon) and a major effort in 480-479 (the battles of Salamis and Plataea) failed because the Greeks united under Spartan leadership. Thereafter Sparta gave up her leadership of the coalition. Since the war was primarily a sea operation anyway, Athens was the logical successor. At first this Delian League was a voluntary coalition, although most of the men and ships were Athenian. Gradually, as the Persians were driven out of the Aegean (478-462), the league became an Athenian empire, since Athens forced liberated cities to join and would not allow members to drop out. Athens reached her height of power and splendence under the leadership of [Pericles](#) (fl. 457-429) who persuaded the citizens to take the common contributions of league members for Athens' use in beautifying the city and the [Acropolis](#) and in keeping up the large navy to expand her control over the eastern Mediterranean. Paradoxically, Athens, the leading democracy among city-states, was also the major imperialist power, although the empire did bring prosperity and security to those under Athenian rule.

Athens' empire-building led directly to the long and ruinous Peloponnesian War (431-401) with Sparta and her allies. This war revealed the main defect of the **polis** as a political unit: its exclusiveness and narrow self-interests. Athens formally lost the war

and Sparta won, but neither side lost or won more than the other. All Greece was exhausted by the conflict. Athens lost her empire. Sparta briefly held mastery over Greece, followed by Thebes. Continued struggles among the cities weakened them further and prepared the way for outside intervention by Macedon, a kingdom to the north of mainland Greece. After his victory at [Chaeronea](#) (338), Philip of Macedon (382-336), forcibly united the Greeks, then his son [Alexander the Great](#) (356-323) turned their energies to conquer the vast Persian empire and spread Greek culture over the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Against this violent background occurred the brilliant classical age centering on Athens. Within little over a century and a half there occurred a discharge of creative energy probably unparalleled since then. Critics who have attempted to make lists of the greatest figures in western civilization almost always choose (rightly) a large number of classical Greeks. At the beginning of a list of major historians, for example, come Herodotus (c.484-425), the author of the panoramic [history of the Persian wars](#), and Thucydides (c.460-399) who recounted the breakdown of Athens in the [Peloponnesian War](#). Leading a select group of dramatists are Aeschylus (525-456), Sophocles (496-406), and Euripides (485-406) who produced dozens of plays for the edification of Athenians. Phidias (c.500-432) and Praxiteles (active 364) begin any list of sculptors, particularly the former for his Parthenon sculptures. The architect of the Parthenon itself, Ictinius (active 447-432) ranks high among major figures of that art form. The first major philosophers were Socrates (469-399), Plato (c.428-347), and Aristotle (384-322) who not only raised most of the problems later thinkers were to try to solve but also laid down basic techniques subsequently considered necessary to solve the problems. Such a profusion of genius cannot be finally explained, but it is more easily understood when one knows the basic features of the Greek outlook and the stimulation given to Greeks by the **polis**.

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The argument is that the **polis** helps explain the brilliance of the Classical Age. Is there another explanation?

The World as an Intelligible Whole: the Greek Outlook

Underlying most of what the Greeks thought and did were several beliefs, values, and tendencies. One of these was fundamental; the others were derivatives and implications of it. Fundamental for Greeks was faith in the coherence of things and in man's ability to know this basic order. Out of this basic conviction came the Greek tendency to take a whole view of things. Almost as if obeying an instinct, Greeks intuitively looked beyond the parts to the whole and beyond the individual thing to the universal framework into which it might be put. In so doing they demonstrated feeling for balance, harmony, proportion, and symmetry, qualities which remained uniquely theirs. They also valued rationalism--the kind of thinking men do when they keep asking questions about the nature of things on the assumption that they can discover logical principles as basic explanations. Finally, Greeks did believe that there was a natural explanation to questions about this world and human life. They gloried in life even with its uncertainties, pains, and mortality, and they believed in man's capabilities and the full development of them.

The Greek faith in the coherence of things and in man's capacity to know was one of the great leaps forward in terms of the many intellectual possibilities it opened up. Probably it began with an intuition, a religious feeling for the divinity and unity of nature, as expressed in the work of potters in the Dark Ages who acted on the new faith when creating the geometric styles of pottery. Homer more clearly articulated the belief while recognizing a consistent theme underlying all the actions of gods and men. He stated it as a moral order--Moirā--that which was right and proper and unchangeable for the gods as well as men. Later, Greek dramatists would reiterate the same conviction in moral terms. Two centuries after Homer, however, philosophers in another flash of insight began to go beyond the Homeric view and to make the belief in order a matter of intellectual speculation. They started trying to identify laws which would explain all things, not just what happened if one committed offenses against basic morality. They believed such laws existed within the whole natural order; one just had to think about them until the mind could apprehend them. In this belief they were laying groundwork for modern science which owes its own faith in an orderly world at least partly to the Greeks. And they were shedding more of the mythopoeic outlook which the Greeks of the Dark Ages had begun to abandon.

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React to the argument that the faith in the coherence of all things and in man's ability to grasp this coherence began as an intuition, a non-rational leap of faith that something is true. How does one **know** something? Is it a rational process or an intuitive one? What roles do intuition and reason play in thinking and understanding?

[Thales](#) in the early sixth century seems to have been the first to try to state a natural and logical explanation of the world. He declared that water was the single substance which made up everything. His successors in the sixth and fifth centuries (before Socrates who emphasized other concerns) thought that he was wrong about water but right about the existence of a single, knowable substance. As they criticized Thales and each other, becoming more self-conscious about their use of logical analysis, they tended to offer increasingly generalized and abstract theories which claimed to account for the whole of reality. For instance, [Heraclitus](#) (active 500-490) insisted that the basic law was constant change according to proportion. Change was caused by the clash of balancing opposites in such a way that all the natural world perpetually renewed and regulated itself. Since the law applied to all reality (the Greeks tending to take the whole view), Heraclitus was offering an early statement of natural law. Later this concept would influence Roman law and impel European thinkers of the Enlightenment.

In discussing the Greek belief in the coherence of things we have also touched on other characteristics of their outlook. The tendency to keep the whole in focus, for example, pervaded the Iliad. Homer had a single universal theme, although he told a fascinating story. The theme was that the committing of **hubris**, acting without due regard for one's limits as a man, would be punished. He chose the Trojan War and some of its stories as the backdrop to his epic, but he selected one story as the central one: a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles in which both had been guilty of **hubris**, Agamemnon by being arrogant and Achilles by getting violently angry. The epic included a wealth of other materials, but Homer subordinated them all to the teaching of the moral lesson. **Hubris** brought punishment on oneself and on countless others as well.

Greek philosophers and artists were also guided by a holistic outlook. The attempt by thinkers to drive to the single sustaining principle underlying all things was based on the assumption that the universe was indeed a unified whole. It did not occur to philosophers before the fifth century that a single set of laws might not apply equally to physical, ethical, and political problems. They assumed reality to be one and so, as we just saw, tried to devise natural law to cover everything. From the seventh century down to about 400 Greek sculptors characteristically aimed at portraying not individual figures but [idealized ones](#). To have presented the human figure realistically would have been to focus on the individual or the particular. Greek sculptors chose rather to try to convey the universal in the individual human figure. They even went so far as to try to formulate laws governing the form and the movement of the human figure. Similarly, in the most prevalent architectural form, the temple, architects worked toward achieving a unified, whole structure. The Parthenon on Athens' [Acropolis](#) (built 447-438) reflected this, as well as the tendency to try to balance, to harmonize, to create proportion. The whole effect took precedence over individual parts, including the sculptures. Lines were subtly

altered to create the illusion of perfect straightness. Columns were carefully sized and placed to make the structure seem regular and solidly based. All was almost mathematically proportioned, and yet aesthetically, not stiffly so. (For an interesting take on the Golden Mean as applied to the Parthenon, see [this link](#).) The result was by itself probably more characteristic of Greek culture than any other single work.

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1. How do you respond to the idea that the Greeks took a holistic view of things?
 2. What about the implications for art and architecture, not to mention poetry?
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A third element of Greek culture, the value placed on rationalism, has also been implied in the discussion of the Iliad and early Greek philosophy. The Homeric outlook was a basic confidence that man could best accommodate himself to an intelligible world by taking thought about his moral behavior. He could do little about his ultimate fate except meet it heroically. But he could be assured that the divine forces which sometimes impelled him were human-like and behaved in ways man could understand. Thales and the other pre-Socratics placed even greater reliance on rationalism when they assumed that what governed the universe was essentially the same as human thought. Hence the mind could fathom the universe if it thought in a logical fashion.

No one, however, surpassed the confidence in reason shown by Socrates, his pupil Plato, and his pupil's pupil Aristotle. They did not have the same interests in natural philosophy which the pre-Socratics had, but they used and improved the tools of reason and logical analysis which their predecessors had developed. Socrates apparently believed that man needed most to know the Good if he was to live well. He meant by the Good not a consensus of what men accepted as goodness or what had been traditionally thought to be good. He used Good in the absolute sense, always the same for all men everywhere. It existed within man and as an objective reality underlying the visible world. Once man knew it, he would be virtuous. Indeed, it would be impossible for him not to be "good". If a man did evil, it was only because he did not know the Good.

[Plato](#) went on to develop Socrates' ideas even more. He taught that not only the Good but all other ideals existed in a world beyond the world of the senses. This world alone was real, all else being illusory. One could know the Good, the True and the Beautiful, the world of perfect forms, by rigorous rational inquiry and contemplation which culminated in spiritual illumination. Few would manage to do it, however, and those few had the job of trying to lead others to discover as much as they could of the ideal world. This elite, Plato declared, was the only fit ruling class for the truly good **polis**.

[Aristotle's](#) interests outreached his masters' in that he wrote on practically everything. In fact, he created categories of knowledge which scholars followed for centuries and which they have still not entirely given up. He systematized all that he studied: political systems, principles of logic, literary criticism, most of the sciences, and others. In this he, as the others, demonstrated the force of the conviction that man could know and understand if he used reason.

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Where did the Greeks get their confidence in reason? Is the belief in rational thinking just another kind of faith? What gave them the assurance they were right?

Sometimes Greeks tended to follow reason when experimentation and observation would have been better. There was a lot of nonsense in Greek theories about the natural world as well as astonishing insights. The physician [Hippocrates of Cos](#) (469-399) exemplified the best of both rationalism and the desire for facts. Pure theorizing was hardly worthwhile, he said, unless it was based on actual observation. One needed to examine patients, record their conditions, and then draw theories about their ills. Hippocrates, however, did not start a trend toward this kind of experimentalism. This emphasis in science would not come until modern times in Europe. Still, the Greek faith that continual questioning led to basic explanations--rationalism--was a vital part of the scientific world-view.

Hippocrates' attitude towards medicine also points to a fourth aspect of Greek culture--naturalism or a belief that the natural world and human life contain their own explanations and are worthwhile in their own right. Hippocrates rejected the common view that sickness was caused by the gods. Sometimes his judgments about causes were rather dubious, as in his contention that climate had an effect on a person's physique and health, but the important thing was his stress on natural rather than supernatural explanations.

Another aspect of the Greeks' naturalism was their zestful attitude towards life. In spite of life's misery and frustration, most Greeks until the Hellenistic period did not think the next world had anything to offer. The [Odyssey](#) said as much in the scene (Book 11, lines 460-540) in which Odysseus visited Hades and was told by the dead Achilles that it was

better to be the lowest slave alive than the greatest king in the underworld. Life being really all there was, one should live to the fullest. For the Homeric heroes this had meant seeking glory even at the price of an early death, and Greeks continued to admire that ideal. But within the context of the life of the **polis** they also thought that life should mean cultivating all man's capabilities and trying to do varied things well. The thing to strive for was control, so as not to be carried away, or restraint, not license, in doing what was done.

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1. How can one live life fully and zestfully if there is no confidence about an afterlife?
 2. The Greek ideal of living heroically and dying gloriously is not a dead ideal is it? Can you think of ways that ideal has survived?
 3. Think back to the Hebrews and their ideal of the Good Life. Compare it to the Greek ideal. What are the differences? (Think of Micah 6:8: what is it that God requires but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?) Keep these different ideals in mind; we will come back to them when we get to Christianity and the medieval era.
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The Polis as the Context for Greek Life

It was no coincidence that the **polis** appeared soon after the rudiments of Greek culture had been consolidated. The two were so tied together that to understand the Greek outlook it is necessary to understand what the **polis** meant. Most of what is known about the **polis** is based on the Athenian experience. This is bad in one way because no other **polis** was quite like Athens. And yet we know more about its life. If it was atypical, it was so because it stimulated its citizens in more ways than other city-states.

What did the **polis** mean to the Greek? First of all, it is clear that it meant the right way for man to live because it was a microcosm in its laws and constitution of the fundamental order of the world. The world was a cosmos, organized and structured, instead of a chaos because of divine, eternal laws. Similarly, human society was a **polis** in which men could control themselves and live a full and excellent life because of the rule of law. Without the **polis** only a despot could manage things. Greeks were well aware of the pattern of theocratic absolutism which predominated in the Near East and they rejected it. As the Hebrews, they took the view that all men were responsible for the welfare of society. Aristotle summed up their sentiments in a single sentence:

Man is an animal whose characteristic it is to live in a city-state.¹

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The Greeks believed that what man needed to perfect himself in an all-rounded way was to live in the **polis**. In other words, he didn't need salvation; he needed civic life. What do you think? How does one become a better human being? Truly, fully human in the fullest expression of humanity of which man is capable? Inner transformation by some religious or moral conversion? Outer transformation by living in the right kind of society?

Aeschylus said essentially this in the **Oresteia** when he held up the **polis** as the only means of solving the knottiest human problems. The main action of the trilogy of plays ([Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides](#)) was the bloody myth of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, Clytemnestra, his wife, and Orestes, their son. Because Agamemnon had sacrificed one of their daughters to appease the gods before setting out for Troy, Clytemnestra killed him when he returned from the war. Zeus thereupon commanded, through Apollo, that Orestes kill his mother as an act of justice. Orestes obeyed at the cost of violating the blood-tie himself and facing the wrath of the Furies, deities whose job it was to avenge such crimes as parricide. Where would it end? How could things be righted when one act of justice led to further injustice? Aeschylus' answer was that justice could come only through the **polis**. Orestes fled from the Furies to Athens, where Athena, acting for Zeus, persuaded the Furies to submit the question to the Athenian citizens and to accept their decision. When Orestes was released, Athena convinced the Furies that they ought to become guardians of the **polis**, punishing those who disturbed or violated the civic order. By divine sanction, then, the **polis** had brought justice so that all claims were satisfied. The law of the city had become the same as the fundamental moral order of the universe, each deserving the same reverence.

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If one believes that his society is grounded in the nature of things, mirrors the basic order of things, he will accept its laws as just. Right? What if he doesn't believe that his society is based on universal principles of justice? Will he obey the laws?

A fundamental part of a young man's education, besides the study of Homer and of the **polis'** day-to-day business, was learning the basic laws of the city-state, or **nomoi**. By this practice the **polis** not only proclaimed what justice, and moral virtues and social ideals were, but proposed to teach them to its citizens. As a young man learned these laws and imbibed their spirit, therefore, he was being transformed into a higher type of human being. (The idea of law as a molder of human character eventually influenced Roman law and thence European culture.)

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These last two sentences relate to my previous questions above about what man needs to perfect himself. Again, can one be made into a better person by living in and being subject to the laws and government and experience of social life?

The audience which viewed Aeschylus' plays (and which served on the juries trying to maintain justice) was not an idle elite but the whole body of citizens of the **polis**. Thus the second meaning of the **polis** to Greeks was that it was the whole community and its way of life. Not just in democratic Athens but in the monarchical or aristocratically ruled city-states as well, the general feeling was that the affairs of the **polis** concerned all citizens. Citizens might not participate fully in all matters in some city-states, but that did not mean that it was up to one man either to decide everything as in Persia.

Athenians carried the principle that the **polis** belonged to all farther than anyone else. They believed that a man's first duty was to public business: attending the Assembly to which all adult Athenian males belonged; serving on the juries which administered the laws of the **polis**: fighting for the city-state in time of war; holding public office if chosen by his fellow citizens; and taking an active part in the dramas, festivals, and games sponsored by the city. This was an admirable ideal, but how did Greeks find the time? By living simply. Before the fourth century, it took only part of the day to do the amount of work required to have the necessities of life. The rest was left for public business. How did Greeks know enough to be so fully involved? The [small scale of the polis](#) made it possible. A citizen lived daily with the problems of the city-state and he knew as well as anyone else what was going on. If he did not care enough to know and take part in public affairs he was useless (idiotes) to the city and himself.

Any matter concerning the **polis** could come before the Assembly which met on the [Pnyx](#) about once a month. Many different matters regularly did: the Assembly was the sole legislative body; it decided basic foreign policy and controlled finances; it checked all the public officials to see that they were performing properly; it might become a court on very important judicial cases (as in the example of Orestes). Day to day business between the Assembly was handled by a council of five hundred chosen by ballot to serve for a year. Any citizen, therefore, might find himself on this body and could wind up giving a great deal of time to city-state business. As the citizen joined in resolving problems and

making fundamental decisions for Athens, he was free to propose anything which did not contradict old laws and was free to criticize any other proposals or any existing policies. If he criticized policy, however, he was expected to show how his alternative would work better. In fact, he might be given the job of executing his own scheme, with [ostracism](#) as the penalty for failure. The **polis**, therefore, encouraged responsibility as it brought its members into the business of the community.

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If the U.S. Congress followed the principle that before you criticize some policy or action, you had better have a better alternative, what would happen?

When danger threatened, the citizen [fought for the polis](#) with whatever equipment he owned. This meant that the wealthiest bore a share of the fighting which was proportionate to their wealth and stake in the **polis'** welfare. The richest provided and often commanded warships. The moderately wealthy served with their own weapons and armor as members of the phalanx, the city's fighting unit composed of ranks of closely ordered infantry. The poor were support troops or rowers on board the ships of the fleet. Mobilization, in short, was very much like every other facet of life in the **polis**--all participated as fully as they could.

The **polis** not only attempted to draw man into public political business, but also provided religious festivals, games, dramas, public readings of Homer, and common aesthetic experiences through its architecture and art. It was the focus of all man's interests and was an active, formative way of life. Dramatic productions were not for the few. They were civic functions to which all were invited and expected to come. Those citizens unable to pay their way got in free. The brunt of the expense of the productions was borne by wealthy citizens as "liturgies," or "folk-works" for the community. The plays themselves, as in the example of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, were not simply diverting and entertaining in a light sense (not even the comedies by Aristophanes were mindless time-fillers for people who had nothing better to do). They were reminders of civic responsibility and civic greatness. They dealt with fundamental problems of human relations and of human destiny. They were part of a whole effort by the **polis** to train its citizens intellectually and morally.

The measure of the worth of a **polis** for the Greek was not how efficiently it operated, not how powerful militarily or economically it was, but whether it produced human excellence and a satisfying life. [Pericles](#) in his [Funeral Speech](#) in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War gave the classic summary of this conception when he proclaimed Athens as the school of the Greeks with a cultural life open to all and proclaimed the Athenian an unparalleled example of the adaptable and versatile man.

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1. Would you have felt restricted by the communal life of the **polis**? Why? Would the restrictions have been worth it?
 2. Pericles in his Oration, after extolling the heroes who died for the city, said "These take as your model and, judging happiness to be the fruit of freedom and freedom of valour, never decline the dangers of war." Good advice?
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Man and the Good Life in Greek Culture

Man was as complex for the Greeks as he was for the Hebrews. And, characteristically, the Greek outlook took in the whole human condition. Man was divine-like in some respects because of his similarity to the gods and yet he was still weak and ephemeral. He was not individually worthwhile in the same sense as Judaism or Christianity affirmed him to be, but he was a human being, and his mortal life was worthwhile. Free to make choices, he could only do so within the framework of fate or necessity. And yet he was unique in being able to ponder and grasp the essential thrust of life. He could live honorably and well by learning the rhythms which governed his life.

Most Greeks did not think in terms of whether man was basically good or evil. An Orphic myth of the sixth century did present man as a dual being with a divine soul and an evil body. Plato later subscribed to a dualism of this sort and through him the notion influenced Christianity and later European culture. But while it was Greek in tenor, this dualism was not widely adopted before the fourth century. Man was a whole being. If he was good or virtuous it was because he had been shaped toward the ideal of *arete*--all-rounded moral, physical, intellectual, and practical excellence. And if he did evil, it was because he lacked *arete*. In either case, however, what we call his character had been acquired and not inherited. He was not an abject sinner by nature, or a pure spirit, or even a combination of these two split natures.

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1. Greeks did not believe in the sinfulness of man. Was their view of human nature inadequate, incomplete? Why? Why not?
2. Aristotle in Nicomachean Ethics asserted that "excellence of character results from habit." Can this be true? And can this be taught and obtained by practice?
2. Is the idea of dualism (pure spirit, evil flesh) correct? Why? Why not?

Man stood in a close relationship to the gods which was at once the source of his glory and his pain. [Mythology](#) told of the many women who bore children by the gods and also moralized about the men who tried to violate goddesses. Homer presented the gods as human-like in character and behavior. They ate, quarreled, became jealous, made love, fought each other as well as humans, and sometimes were wounded--all very much like man. And yet they were immortal and man was a frail creature who lived, suffered and died all too quickly. The poet [Pindar](#) (c. 522-446) summed up man's relationship to the gods even better than Homer:

"One is the race of Gods and of men; from one mother we both draw our breath. Yet are our powers poles apart."²

Yet the Greeks accepted man's mortality and affirmed his worth anyway. Again, Pindar:

Thing of a day! such is man; a shadow in a dream.
Yet when god-given splendour visits him
A bright radiance plays over him, and how sweet is life!³

For centuries man's dilemma as a free and yet determined being influenced Greek writers. Homer posed it in the Iliad through the characters of the heroic figures Achilles and Hector. Both knew they had to die if they pursued the ideal of *arete*: Hector if he dared to meet Achilles in combat, and Achilles if he went on to kill Hector. Their fate had already been decreed, and yet they chose death consciously and willingly rather than give up *arete* and glory.

Sophocles probed even deeper into the issue of man's freedom and fate in [Oedipus the King](#), a tragedy about a rational and great man who was fated to kill his father and marry his mother unknowingly. In the ancient myth on which the play was based, Oedipus' parents knew his fate and tried to keep it from happening by ordering that he be abandoned as a child. He was spared, however, and grew up in Corinth. When he learned his fate, he left Corinth to spare those he thought were his parents, and fled towards Thebes, his true native city. On the road he met an old man, argued with him and killed him. Arriving at Thebes, he ended the Sphinx's reign of terror, married the widow of the former king and became king himself. He unwittingly fulfilled all the prophecies: the old man he killed was his real father Laius, king of Thebes, and the king's widow was his real mother, Jocasta. Sophocles began the play at that point with Oedipus, as a confident and successful ruler, vowing to punish the murderer of Laius and end the plague ravaging the city as divine punishment for the murder. As his efforts to find the killer led him closer and closer to the truth he refused to stop. He had to know, rationalist that he was. The truth, when it finally came out, was too much for Jocasta who hanged herself and almost too much for Oedipus who stabbed his own eyes in punishment. So Sophocles seemed to be saying that even the great and the wise must suffer. The reason: men are not gods; they

lack divine knowledge, and they are gripped by fate. And yet man was not a puppet; he could accept and live with his fate. Oedipus left the stage a man who had suffered the worst that could happen, but still resolving to live through his suffering.

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Again, if all you have to look forward to is this life and the best that you can enjoy, is it still worth living well?

Greeks found joy in the few simple good things there were in a brief life of poverty. But the means for simple living were not hard to come by, and many of them preferred to live that way so that they could concentrate on what they liked best anyway, the public life of the city. Normally they wore during the day what they slept in at night, ate simple foods (chiefly bread), and lived in modest houses. They prized healthy children, especially brave sons and grandsons, although men spent little time at home in a male-centered **polis**.

The Good Life, more than enjoying family, possessions, and pleasures, was living with a sense of proportion among man's several sides and a respect for man's proper limits. That meant on the one hand whole-mindedness and striving for *arete* in one's own life--all-rounded excellence in those things man can be excellent in, such as speaking, physical prowess, the cultivation of the mind, and wise actions. One should try to balance in his person the cardinal virtues of Wisdom, Courage, Temperance, and Justice as the Homeric writings and the laws of the **polis** taught them. Failure in this was **hamartia**, or perhaps even more serious, **hubris**. Hamartia was potentially a deadly error. Hubris was definitely fatal as a violation of the basic laws of universe--arrogance before the gods or blind anger, setting oneself up too highly--and brought certain retribution at the hands of the gods.

As always for the Greek, there was the political side of the Good Life, for as we have already seen the view that man became more nearly what he could become ideally as he dedicated himself to the common welfare of the **polis** and its whole life. The person who tried to be a private citizen did not do anyone any good, even himself (the root-word for "private person" being the same as for "idiot"). The Good man also exhibited the cardinal virtues in the **polis** by facing danger for it (Courage), curbing his ambitions and pride for it (Temperance), obeying its laws (Justice), and trying to do the right thing at the right time in its public business (Wisdom).

The Transformation of Greek Ideals in Hellenistic Culture

Greek culture down to the fourth century might be summed up in the statement that order and not chaos ruled the world and human affairs. It flourished within the stimulating framework of the **polis** which was a visible sign of the conviction that order prevailed. There, law ruled and not the passions of men. There was a microcosm of universal order, a miniature of the world which contained or embodied that fixed, fundamental order underlying all things. Because they believed that order ruled and not chaos, Greeks tried to see the whole, they were confident of reason's ability to discern order in the world and they strived for harmony, balance, and symmetry in what they thought and said and did. Not only the polis, but Greek philosophy and science, poetry and drama, art and architecture, and the Olympian religion displayed the effects of these cultural beliefs, values, and ideas.

Even by the end of the fifth century, and well before the Hellenistic Age (c.323-30 B.C.), changes in this basic outlook began to appear. There were signs that some men were beginning to doubt that order ruled rather than chaos or at least to think that knowledge about that order, if it could be obtained, was difficult to come by. Their mood was represented by the philosopher-teachers called Sophists who were contemporaries of Socrates and Plato and who raised doubts about traditional beliefs and values. They insisted that virtue meant whatever the individual using the word meant. One of them, Protagoras, went on to declare that all was relative to the individual: "Man is the measure of all things". Even in the plays of Euripides there is an implied questioning of the nature of the fundamental moral order.

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Why does change occur? Why, especially, when things are going well? When the best that can be thought or done or said is being thought, done, and said, why does there have to be change?

The changing character of the **polis** as a whole way of life and a basic unit of international relations was already apparent by the late fifth century. The Peloponnesian War contributed to the deterioration of the internal life of the **polis**, as Thucydides revealed in his accounts (History of the Peloponnesian Wars) of Athens' bitter factional strife, the self-seeking of its leaders after Pericles, and the Assembly's growing irresponsibility during the course of the war. The conflict also brought out the

inadequacies of the **polis** as a basic political form for all who cared to see. Finally, [Alexander the Great](#) sealed the fate of the city-state. After [his career](#) the **polis** had no further significance except as a remembered ideal and an administrative and cultural center to hold together Alexander's kingdom and the later successor kingdoms. City-states ceased being communities of mutually responsible citizens living a common life.

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Alexander the Great is one of the most fascinating figures in history. He seemed to be driven by inner forces which eventually destroyed him. What explains this kind of person?

These tendencies towards changes became so pronounced after Alexander that the term Hellenistic (or "Greek-like") is used to describe the new era, 323-30 B.C. [Alexander](#) may have had dreams of creating a great universal state and a new cultural union to bind together Greeks and his other subject peoples. Although scholars have speculated about his vision of such a cosmopolis, [Alexander died](#) before his plans could be clearly defined or accomplished. His generals struggled over and divided much of his empire, other parts becoming independent. The three major kingdoms which finally emerged were Egypt and the Palestinian coast ruled by the Ptolemy family, the bulk of the old Persian empire ruled by descendants of Seleucus, and Macedonia ruled by Antigonas' heirs. An assortment of minor powers also existed alongside these three including the old Greek city-states which Macedonia controlled. The rulers of these major states may have wanted to unify Alexander's conquests again, but none of them was an Alexander. So such unity as existed among these areas was a common possession of a changing Greek culture and a similar use of some of Alexander's techniques for ruling.

Hellenistic monarchs discarded the Greek principle of self-government and usually claimed to be gods or divinely protected. They ruled for the most part as absolute monarchs in the fashion of Alexander and the old Near East kings. Their strength rested on their Greek and Macedonian mercenary soldiers and bureaucrats who lived in strategic cities, many of which were newly built. Other Greeks also resided in these cities which became commercial and cultural centers of influence drawing each of the realms together internally. Kings welcomed into their service any native inhabitants who were willing to adopt Greek ways. But generally this small ruling class was almost entirely Greco-Macedonian and governed the masses of native peoples.

At least before 200 these kingdoms made possible an expansion in trade and industry and a rise in prosperity among the upper ruling elements. The period was also remarkable for developments which occurred in the sciences. Euclid developed a systematic approach to geometry about 300. About the same time the first human dissections in medicine took place. In astronomy, Aristarchus of Samos (c.310-230) proposed a heliocentric theory, although other scholars rejected his theory for a geocentric one which fit observed facts

better. The geocentric theory of Ptolemy (c.140 A.D.) achieved such acceptance and authority that it lasted almost fifteen centuries.

Two qualities characterized the Greek culture of these Hellenistic kingdoms: universalism and individualism. On the one hand, the Greek outlook tended to become universal or cosmopolitan in keeping with the wider world in which Greeks now moved as an aristocratic ruling class. This involved a reinterpretation and a broadening of basic beliefs and values. Classical Greek culture had been centered on the city-state and restricted to fewer people than in the Hellenistic world. It had also been shared by the whole spectrum of classes within the **polis** (excluding women). On the other hand, the tendency toward universalism was also accompanied by a spirit of individualism, a fact which at first surprises. Yet the forces producing the one tendency also produced the other. Since Greeks no longer lived within tightly-knit communities which defined a whole way of life, they were driven to think as cosmopolitan individuals and to modify traditional assumptions and ideas which had made sense in the group-oriented **polis**. If group ties were weakened, the individual was left more to himself to think about and understand the new world which opened up after Alexander's conquests.

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We are going to spend some more time later on the idea that starting in the Hellenistic Age the individual was cut loose from ties which gave him support and meaning and that this eventually caused a cultural crisis in the ancient world to which only Christianity could offer a solution. How important are your ties to other individuals and groups? Where do you look for meaning?

Until late in the Hellenistic era the notion of a basic order underlying the world still held sway, but not with the simpler and more intensely held convictions of the classical era. The order of things seemed to be much more complex than had been thought before, and if it were to be known it could not be stated in a way which all would find acceptable. The sense of the interrelatedness of things, the feeling for symmetry, harmony, and proportion virtually disappeared as values which carried conviction, along with the **polis** as a whole way of life. Rationalism continued to characterize the philosophic and scientific attempts to explain the world and human affairs, but not with the same intensity of conviction which had characterized thinking down to the fifth century. Alongside rationalism other alternatives grew in popularity across the period. The belief in a naturalistic interpretation of life--that man's mortal life was meaningful in its own right and worth living well--was also challenged by other beliefs that man's hopes were better

placed in individual immortality achieved through a mystical and escapist union with some deity.

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Why did yearnings for immortality or survival of the individual personality grow? This has not always been a major force? Why then? Is it today? For you?

Some of the signs of the universalizing and individualizing of Greek culture were the transformation of the Greek language, changing styles in sculpture, the spread of philosophies of conduct, and the rise of the mystery religions. As the language of the ruling class Greek became dominant in the Middle East, losing its variety in the process. Dialects which had been peculiar to certain Greek cities gave way to uniform and common Greek, the **koine**, or language of all those who wished to be understood anywhere in the Hellenistic world. This language became and remained for centuries a unifying force until superseded by Arabic, the language of the conquering Moslems, in the eight century C. E. Changing styles in sculpture also illustrate the changing direction of Hellenistic culture. Sculptors became realistic and individualistic in the choice of subject matter, common people being depicted almost as often as gods and heroes. Classical Greek sculpture of the fifth century had been a [restrained blend](#) of the ideal type and the individual figure. Its aim was to inspire and unify the group. Emotionalism was present, but harnessed. Hellenistic sculpture, however, was often portrait-like in its detail and calculated through its own agitation to rouse the individual's emotions. (see the [old market woman](#) which will be shown in lecture.) At the same time, its emotional appeal tended to be superficial. This general style spread throughout the Hellenistic world, becoming manneristic, or bound by rules and formulas as it did so.

Finally, the philosophies of conduct, Stoicism and Epicureanism, illustrated both the individualistic and universal tendencies by appealing to the citizen of cosmopolis who had to work out his own problems. The **polis** had enfolded the individual. The absolutist Hellenistic kingdom merely administered him from afar and was too vast to enable him to find emotional loyalty and psychological security in its service. The two philosophies were somewhat different in their appeals but similar in that they both urged that a man control himself through reason and keep his distance from the world.

The message of [Epicurus of Athens](#) (342-271) was that men ought to free themselves from the fear of death and live for pleasure. Death, he declared, was simply the scattering of the atoms which made up the body. Thus one had nothing to fear: no punishment from the gods; no shadowy afterlife. Life was purely a materialistic moment between non-existence and non-existence. One's goal in that moment was to live so as to enjoy a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of pain. Since gross sensuality produced more pain than pleasure, the good life was not sensual and endless pleasure. Rather, the simple life was best and the avoiding of commitments such as marriage and political life. Thus man

finally could attain **ataraxia** or inner calmness to put up with whatever the world did to him.

Zeno of Citium (335-263), the founder of [Stoicism](#), also advocated a search for inner serenity, but believed in doing one's duty in the world all the while. The individual, he said, contained within himself a particle of the Divine Reason which governed the world. He thus could know the ultimate rationality of all things. Knowing it, he should submit to it and discipline himself to disregard all the folly and evil which were contrary to the divine order. If thereby he achieved the state of **apatheia** (emotionlessness), however, his duty still was to carry out his public obligations and to show the virtues of bravery, justice, wisdom, and temperance (which Christianity later borrowed). His duty was also to regard all men as brothers because all possessed the divine within them, but he could not lose his tranquility by loving them. Of the two philosophies, [Stoicism](#) had a greater appeal in the Hellenistic world and later in the Roman Empire than did Epicureanism. Both appealed mainly to the intellect in man, rather than to the emotions which tended to get one into trouble.

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Which of the two (Stoicism or Epicureanism) do you find most appealing? Is either ultimately satisfactory?

The mystery religions, however, appealed to the emotions of those who were not tough-minded enough to follow reason. Called mystery cults because they had secret rituals and teachings only for the initiates, these religions did give some individuals a sense of belonging. One of the more popular seems to have been the cult of Isis and Sarapis. It was a blend of newer Greek mythology and older Egyptian elements. Like other religions, it gave the worshiper hope of a mystical union with deities and a way out of the world and thereby offered some emotional comfort to those seeking answers which they used to find within the traditional polis as a way of life.

All these signs of universalism and individualism point to the future of the eastern Mediterranean world. Had Alexander or any of his successors been able to create a lasting empire to be a political and social framework for Greek culture there might have been an outpouring of creative energy comparable to or greater than that of the city-state era. As it was the Hellenistic monarchs could not even maintain stability in their own realms, much less imitate Alexander. In the absence of political unity, the Hellenistic world was weakened by continuing warfare. After 200 economic decline set in and social tensions increased between the dwindling class of the well-off and the swelling class of the poor. The Hellenistic world became so unstable that it drew other powers on the periphery into the area. The most important of these was Rome. The Hellenistic world had in a sense overreached itself, but it had preserved even as it disseminated and transformed Greek culture. Rome went on to take up Greek culture, blend with it her own

culture and make the resulting synthesis a major binding ingredient in her imperial rule of the Mediterranean world.

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1. Translated by H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), p.11.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-175.