

## Greek Thought

### Classical Period



### I. Culture and History

The Greeks wanted a good life. The question then, as well as now, is how to know what the good life is? How does one recognize the good life? The GOOD itself? How does one gain the knowledge needed to pursue the good life and distinguish it from another that is less good or even not good but appearing as good for those who are foolish, impetuous and ignorant, lacking in wisdom?

The Greeks at the time of Socrates and Plato were undergoing a major change in the way in which they would think about the world, themselves and reality itself. Greek culture rose to great heights in the period from 525 BC to 350 BC, the period that brackets the lifespan of Socrates and Plato. In this period Athens, the Greek city-state, would rise to the height of its political and military powers and would come to represent the height of Greek cultural achievement as well. The Greeks during this time, and particularly in Athens, were moving from an oral to a literate culture and from a foundation of religious belief and mythology to another based upon the inventions and creations of artistic endeavor and rational thought.

The Greeks, prior to Plato, had a culture (the way a people learn to think, feel and act from the previous generation) that was transmitted orally. Few could read or write. There was little material to write upon. Papyrus from Egypt would be arriving and be popularized after Socrates death. If the average Greek were to learn about anything it would need to be through

hearing whatever it was spoken about. What they heard they made every effort to remember and then repeat. This pattern for transmitting information became a pattern for life itself. The tales of the gods and goddesses, the titans, heroes and heroines were placed in rhyme and meter to make it easier to remember. What they remembered of the tales they endeavored to repeat not only in the telling of the tales but also in their lives. The gods and goddesses supplied the examples, the paradigms, and the models for behavior. If the gods did it, it must be good and so I should do it as well: so went the thinking. When faced with a conflict or problem the Greeks had sought answers in the stories that they heard as they grew and which they believed were true and served as guides through life for each of them. By the time of Socrates there had grown a considerable amount of doubt about the stories. There was skepticism and outright denial as well. The tales when examined often displayed a number of troublesome features including contradictions amongst the many stories and examples of divine beings acting in a morally outrageous manner, such as involving murder, patricide, matricide, rape, theft, lies etc... The playwrights were encouraging audiences to reflect upon the tales and consider the values and morality within them. Orators were distorting the tales for personal gain and some, such as Socrates, were examining the entire basis for the moral order.

The tales appear to describe a number of gods and goddesses who have each an assigned place in a general hierarchy. As the divine beings had an order, so too should the human community have an order. The question had arisen: upon what was the order to be based? Should it be based upon moira, fate or destiny, as with the gods or upon something else? The Greeks, as with most humans, hated chaos, disorder. As the gods enjoyed a cosmos, order, so too should humans have an order. The Greeks look for the order in the tales of the gods but by the time of Socrates that approach was no longer working.

Greek culture was mythopoetic, based upon myths and transmitted through poetry. These tales had an imaginative character and an emotional one as well. The myths proclaim a truth, which transcends reasoning. These myths try to bring about the truth that they proclaim: the moral truths. The myths are a form of action or ritual behavior, which must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of truth. The logic of the events, the order of causality, is anthropomorphic. If one asks "why" things are as they are, then the answer will be in the

form of "who" is responsible or the agent behind the events. The function of these myths, as in most cultures, is to explain, unify, and order experience. The myths dispel chaos. They reveal a structure, order, coherence and meaning not otherwise evident.

The tales spoke of Zeus, Chronos, Poseidon, Hera, Athena and dozens of other divinities, each with a genealogy and an assigned place in the pantheon or general organization of the divine community. The divinities did not get along all that amicably. The tales told of terrible and violent conflicts. This is probably due to the coming together of the tales and divinities of two different peoples that became the Greeks of Plato's time. There were the original peoples of the land now called Greece and there were the Aryan invaders, the Ionians and Dorians. These peoples had different conceptions of the world and of the realm beyond it. The indigenous or autotochthonous , peoples were matriarchal with theriomorphic divinities. They tended to be pacific and agrarian. The Aryans, from Anatolia, were patriarchal with anthropomorphic deities. They were nomadic and belligerent. The tales of Homer and Hesiod contain an amalgamation of tales in which the deities (many female) are woven into the tales of the invading peoples in order to accommodate the belief systems of the indigenous peoples. For example, while Zeus is placed at the top of a hierarchy of deities, he has a wife, Hera, who is supposed to be by his side, but whom he regularly disrespects or insults. Hera is she who has no specific name; "she" or "her" the name for the highest female deity of the indigenous peoples. Athena, one of the highest of the native deities (the "th" indicates she was a deity of the indigenous peoples) is given a place very high in the order. Athena is reported to have been born or to have emerged directly from the head of Zeus, knowing no woman as mother! Athena, the protective deity of Athens, represents wisdom (what philosophers seek) and she also offers assistance to warriors. She takes on the form of an owl to bring information and advice to humans. (Owls are associated with wisdom in much of the western world to this day.)

The physical conflicts between the two peoples who merged into the Greeks is mirrored in the tales of the deities. Zeus takes several wives and has affairs, possibly to appease the indigenous peoples beliefs in the high order of their female deities. The deities of the indigenous peoples are transformed, metamorphosed, into human like beings with super human qualities.

The tales organized under Homer and Hesiod were used by the people as an encyclopedia, as the foundation of the educational system. The tales were entertaining, containing stories of adventure. There was a great deal of sex and violence in them as well. They held the interest of generations of listeners and offered instruction on how to conduct war, raise children, administer assistance to the wounded, resolve family conflicts and much more. The tales, epic works, gave the Greeks a sense of history and their place in the general scheme of things. The myths provided a set of moral exemplars, which each Greek was to follow. Each Greek was to be the best that they could be, pursue virtue (arête), accept fate and prepare for the next life.

The vocabulary was not advanced and often the Greeks would think in terms of the stories and the characters in them rather than in the abstract. For example, if one were to call for justice the Greek would call upon the female deity who represented justice to come and settle the matter in some way. The figure of a robed woman with blindfold holding a scale in one arm, is the representation of the goddess whose actions are what the Greeks had thought of as Justice. Themis, the Divine Right or Divine Justice and Dike, human Justice, were the deities whose actions constituted the Greek idea of the Right or Justice. It is Socrates' time that the Greeks are seeking an answer without recourse to those stories and without the picture thinking methodology of the mythopoetic culture, which was rapidly waning.



The Greeks at the time of Socrates and Plato had experienced a criticism of the tales and the morality of the gods in their dramas performed in public amphitheaters. There was a raising of questions concerning the moral foundation that was disturbing the order. Chaos was threatening! There was a noticeable breakdown of traditions. There was a decline in respect for both the tradition and the laws. The Greeks were familiar with speculation about the nature of the universe that did not involve the deities. They had experienced a development in technology that afforded a much higher quality of

life than known by their ancestors. Through trade, travel and warfare they had come to know of other peoples, their history and cultures; their belief systems and values. The Greeks were undergoing a shift in their worldviews and along with that a change in their values, their ethical orientation and conceptual frameworks. In these ways the Greeks of 400 BC are like the peoples of advanced technological societies today in a post-modern era.

*serious reservations were voiced about the traditional gods. Before 500 B.C. the free-thinker Xenophanes (who even attacked the Greek obsession with athletics!) spurned the gods of Homer and Hesiod for their deplorable behavior -- "thieving, fornicating and tricking one another." Before 400, Thucydides wrote a history, obsessed with explanation, that all but left the gods out of the frame. Plato, not much later, wanted to exclude these old portrayals of the divine from his ideal polity. So, by the time of the tragedian Euripides, many did not take the Homeric vision of the gods literally: their mythical interventions were a way of talking about human life rather than a description or a truth. Oliver Taplin ( December 14, 2003, New York Times, Book Review)*

The key question for humans was and is: how to live a GOOD life? Before 500 BC the Greeks answered that by thinking that the way was to follow the gods and to accept moira. After 400 BC the answer was not so clear at all. What had happened? This is something worth examining for what it may offer those in our time. Before 1800 the answer to the question in the West had been to obey God's commandments and accept God's will. Today that answer does not appear to be the actual approach in practice. There does not appear to be any commonly accepted answer to the question. In a post-modern age the general respect for the laws of God, the truth of science, the traditions of our ancestors all seems in doubt. Ideas of an objective truth and single standard for justice are regularly derided in discussions of the judicial system. Ideas of relative truths and morality are very popular.

The Greeks were clustered due to conditions of geography and geopolitics. They lived in city-states, polii. (The term "politics" comes from this condition.) They often quarreled and went to war with one another. The various city-states were organized under different forms of government. There were several: tyranny, military dictatorship, Oligarchy, Autocratic, Aristocracy and Democracy. These forms might change over time. Indeed, in Athens prior

to Plato the Athenians had experienced several transitions; arriving at a form of democracy that would put Socrates to death and motivate Plato to become a philosopher and write about an ideal polii or state in his work , the Republic. The Greeks preferred any form of government and thus order to chaos or disorder as would be present with tyranny (no rule of law or constitution).

Athens had defeated great city-states and foreign empires in several wars; sea war in particular. Athens enjoyed a great prosperity as a result that brought many public works, theaters, temples, buildings, water works, streets, commerce, festivals, foreign “teachers” or speakers. Athens represented an open city and a way of life that was open to ideas, foreigners, trade etc.. Athens principle threat at the time of Socrates death was Sparta. If Athens represented the way of ADVENTURE , Sparta represented the way of SAFETY. I the quest after cosmos over chaos, Sparta had become an oligarchic state with a strict disciplinary code and a great deal of uniformity. Sparta had a totalitarian government. Athens created a democracy. Just prior to Socrates trial and death Sparta defeats Athens in battle and imposes a rule by thirty young men who would become the tyranny that would be overthrown an democracy put in its place. Socrates lived and died in Athens. He embodied much of its spirit. He was open minded and questioned all. His life in pursuit of the GOOD was also one of intellectual adventure. The chaos that threatened Athens in 399BC was associated with the openness of the preceding years. In an attempt to restore an order, to fashion a cosmos again, Socrates appears as a thereat to the rulers of Athens and that threat must be removed. In the lives of many humans there often come moments when a choice must be made between the path of adventure versus that of safety. Athens and Sparta represented those paths.

The Greeks were moving from pre-history and the mythic time to history. They recorded events and preserved them and transmitted them. The Greeks were moving from the mythic mode of thought as well. Instead of accepting and repeating the tales they were starting to reflect upon them, to examine them closely and even to question, doubt and disbelieve. A clear indication of the process of rational reflection upon the mythic epics is given in the works of the playwrights. This is the material of the next section.