



THE GREEKS, THE WEST AND WORLD CULTURE

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

Part 1 of 2

Before I name and describe the unique contributions of the West, permit me to make three preliminary remarks—and clarifications. First, let me call your attention to the most obvious and indisputable basic difference between West and East: there is only *one* cultural tradition in the West compared with three or four—or more—quite distinct cultural traditions in the East. The easiest way to represent the unity of Western culture is to point to the *Great Books of the Western World*—and to the Syntopicon which exhibits the unity of that tradition—the one conversation in which all the great books take part. A similar representation of the cultures of the East, as I explained to the Far Eastern Seminar last summer, would require three or four sets of books and three or four Syntopicons.

The unity of Western culture, as exhibited in the Syntopicon, is not a doctrinal unity but a dialectical unity. It is not a unity of agreement about what is true or false. It is a unity of understanding or communication: the unity of a single conversation in which men who disagree nevertheless engage with one another—relevantly. The whole of Western thought constitutes a single universe of discourse. Not only is this universe of discourse different from anything to be found in the East; but, what is more important here, there is not one but several distinct universes of discourse in the East.

My second preliminary point is that the one cultural tradition of the West has identifiable sources. They are to be found in the cultural products of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. These are the two fountainheads of Western culture. But what is unique about the West comes more from its Greek than from its Hebrew source. Greece is the intellectual fountainhead of the West. Judaism is the religious fountainhead of the West. I am going to stress those aspects of Western culture that are wholly Greek in origin, for it is these which most sharply distinguish the West from the East.

The one Hebrew contribution which, as fused with Greek thought, tends to be uniquely Western lies in theology: theism and monotheism. But theology is not distinctively or characteristically Hebrew. The Old Testament is not a philosophical or a theological book. It is not a book of ideas. In contrast to the literature of Greece, consider the Book of Psalms, the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Ecclesiastes, the writings of the Prophets, and, above all, the Gospels. These have a much closer affinity with the East than anything else in the West. I will try to explain why a little later.

My third and last preliminary remark is of the utmost importance for your understanding of what I am going to try to say. I have used the word “unique” several times in referring to the contributions of the West. “Unique” is a strong word. It calls for explanation. In the course of its discussions last August, the seminar on Far Eastern Thought painfully discovered that there are things in the East for which there are no Western equivalents—no genuine parallels, no translation. They also learned that this must be recognized in order to understand the outstanding contributions of the several Eastern cultures. To attempt to translate them into or reduce them to Western terms is to fail to grasp them. In other words, there are certain aspects of the Eastern cultures that are unique. What I am saying is simply the complementary converse of that: there are certain aspects of Western culture that have no Eastern equivalents—no genuine parallels, no translation.

This much may seem clear to you at once—and even acceptable, as it should be; for it would certainly be odd, indeed, if there were unique aspects of Eastern culture that Westerners had to understand in their own terms, but no unique aspects of Western culture that required the same acknowledgement of their uniqueness. But the moment I go further and specifically name the things that are uniquely Western, you will probably begin to misunderstand me; and, in addition, to disagree with me even though you do not understand. Why? Because the words I will have to use to name the uniquely Western contributions are the very same words that Easterners use when they speak to us in English about their cultures. Hence, if you suppose that these same words are being used in exactly the same senses, you will be led to the conclusion that what I am trying to say is false.

I must, therefore, beg you not only to listen to my words carefully, but, more important, to pay close attention to the precise meaning I assign to them; for only in the precise sense in which I use them will these words name aspects of culture that are *uniquely* Western.

I must implore your patience a moment longer to state for you a basic—and typically Western—rule for the handling of words in discourse. Based on such reading as I have done in the literatures of the East, the statement that this rule is uniquely Western is one of my surest guesses about Eastern writing and thought. My guess is that this basic rule about the handling of words is not observed in Eastern discourse. On the contrary, it is intentionally violated; for the Eastern writers could not say what they are trying to say if they allowed themselves to be governed by this rule.

The rule is simply this: always to observe whether a word that is used to name two or more things is being used *univocally*, *analogically*, or *equivocally*. Let me explain.

Univocal usage occurs when the same word is used with exactly the same meaning; as, for example, “animal” of a cat and a dog.

Analogical usage occurs when the same word is used with different but related (partly overlapping) meanings, i.e., with some thread of meaning in common; as, for example, “father” when we use it of a progenitor, a priest, and God.

Equivocal usage occurs when the same word is used with different and totally unrelated meanings—with no meaning at all in com-

mon; as, for example, “pen” used for a writing instrument and for an enclosure for animals.

Now, the rule that governs Western discourse calls upon us to avoid equivocation, and to recognize whether a word is being used univocally or analogically; and, if the latter, always to distinguish the several distinct though related senses of analogically used words.

Hence, please try to understand that when I come to name the unique aspects or contributions of Western culture, I will be using the same words that Easterners use when they speak English; but they and I will not be using these words univocally—*never in exactly the same sense*.

In some cases—very important ones—we (the Easterners and I) will be using these same words *equivocally—with no common meaning at all*. In other cases, we will be using these same words *analogically—and* in these cases it is of the utmost importance to observe the difference in the senses as well as to discover the common thread of meaning—often very, very thin—that makes the usage analogical. Finally, in the case of those words which I use to name the unique aspects of Western culture, we—they and I—will never be using these words univocally, never in exactly the same sense; except in those instances in which they—the Easterners—use these words to name the things in Eastern culture that have been consciously and deliberately imported from the West.

With this preparation, we are now ready to consider the unique contributions of the West, and to begin by considering the legacy of Greece to the West, for most of what is unique about Western culture was created or invented by the Greeks.

The Contribution of the Greeks

The first great invention of the Greeks was the *polis* or the *republic*: the state—city-state or nation-state. This involves two related inventions: (1) the invention of the constitution—and constitutional government; and (2) the invention of the primary constitutional office—that of citizenship. To understand the *polis* or *republic*, it must be contrasted with the village communities (such as existed for centuries in India or China) in which paternal government prevails—the government of the elders; and also with the larger social agglomerations that are not states in the strictly political sense because royal government prevails—the government of kings that is an extension to these larger communities of the gov-

ernment by the elders in the tribal or village communities. Royal government—the rule of kings and emperors, the rule of maharajahs, overlords, and shoguns—is not political.

This Western invention has only very recently been imported by Japan and India; and it is highly questionable whether it now exists in China, though for a brief period—that of the so-called “Chinese republic”—it existed there, however feebly, as an import from the West. The West is political; the East is not.

The second great invention of the Greeks is difficult to name without being misunderstood. To name it, I am going to use the word “science” and explain the precise sense in which I regard science as a unique contribution of the West to the civilization of mankind. In the first place, I am using the word “science” to name all the diverse modes of inquiry by which distinct bodies of knowledge are methodically and systematically built up. Please observe that I am using the word “science” generically, as we sometimes use the adjective, when we speak of “a scientific attitude” or “the scientific method.” Used in this way, we can speak, for example, of scientific historians, though history is a distinct body of knowledge and a distinct mode of inquiry as contrasted with empirical science—which is not science in the generic sense, but only one of the modes of science.

The Greeks not only invented science generically but they also distinguished four modes of science—of which mathematics is one, philosophy is another, history is a third, and what we call “empirical science” is a fourth.

Let me now offer you four explanatory comments that may make this clearer to you.

(1) Negatively, the Greeks sharply distinguished science from religion, and that distinction has been preserved and accentuated throughout the rest of Western culture. Since philosophy is a scientific enterprise, it is sharply distinguished from religion in the West, just as mathematics is, or empirical science.

(2) History as a scientific enterprise begins with Herodotus in the sixth century, B.C. The Greek word—*historia*—means investigations or researches. The historian develops methods of finding things out about the past and testing differing accounts of what happened. This is uniquely Western, as everything else that is scientific is uniquely Western.

(3) The essence of the scientific enterprise in the West—whether the form it takes is mathematics or history or philosophy or empirical science—is *objectivity*. *Objectivity*, in the sense that I attach to the word, is another way of stating a unique aspect of Western culture. The objectivity of the West lies in the Western conception of truth as applied to every phase or part of the scientific enterprise. Truth is the conformity of the mind to that *which is*,—a reality absolutely independent of the mind, which measures it and separates the true from the false.

The *objectivity* of the Greeks that is so essential to their invention of the scientific enterprise reveals them to have had a predominant interest in the outer world rather than in man's inner life. They approached man himself from the outside, as just one of the many *objects* to be found in nature, instead of exploring man from the inside.

This point can be made in still another way. The Greeks were concerned primarily with Nature, not with Man; and with Man only as a part of Nature—a natural object. *Negatively*, this means that the Greeks were “humanists” only in a very qualified or restricted sense.

In contrast to the *objectivity* and the restricted humanism of the West which is never anthropocentric, or man-centered, the East, I am suggesting, tends in the opposite direction toward *subjectivity*, toward the exploration of the inner life rather than the outer world, and toward a humanism that is definitely anthropocentric or man-centered.

(4) There is one other thing about the scientific enterprise that, beginning with the Greeks, characterizes the whole of Western culture and sharply differentiates it from the cultures of the East. The scientific enterprise, as a whole and in all its parts, is *purely intellectual* and basically *cooperative*. I can make this point most clearly with respect to Western philosophy (which is one part of the scientific enterprise) as contrasted with what is called “philosophy” in the East. (The difference is so great that it would almost appear to be an equivocal use of the word in the two cases.)

Philosophy in the West is *not* a way of life, or even a way of thought: it is a scientific, that is, a *purely intellectual*, enterprise, methodically conducted, aimed at the building up of a body of knowledge. *The few exceptions* in the West make this clear: (a) in Greece, the Pythagorean cult represented a momentary confusion of mathematics and philosophy with religion—or a way of life,

with a code and a ritual to follow; (b) the writings of the Stoics contain some intimations of a Stoic way of life, but this is, for the most part, subordinated to what the Stoic philosophers expounded as their doctrines in physics, logic, and ethics; (c) the Christian mystics represent another special way of life—and a definitely non-rational, even anti-rational, way of thought; but they stand far apart from, as well as against, philosophy in the Western sense, which is wholly scientific in its spirit and offers no one a way of life any more than mathematics, historical research, and empirical science do.

The third legacy from the Greeks that constitutes a unique achievement of the West centers on what, for the want of a better name, I call “dialogue.” Robert M. Hutchins has said, quite properly I think, that the West is the civilization of the dialogue.” And the Greeks invented the dialogue.

Two words—the Greek word “*logos*” and the Latin “*ratio*”—help us to grasp this. The civilization of the dialogue centers on what is expressed by the Greek word “*logos*.” This means more than logic, though it does mean that. It means the concentration on *word* and *idea*, for the “*logos*” is both word and *idea*, and both in intimate relation to one another. The other word is the Latin word “*ratio*” from which we get “rational.”

The civilization of the dialogue is a civilization that trusts reason, regards reason as the best tool in man’s possession, and finds in the state and in the scientific enterprise the best expressions of man’s use of reason. It is a civilization in which the highest ideal of human achievement calls for the best use that men can make of reason in dealing with one another, through logically clear words and ideas, either in the political enterprise of the state or in the various scientific enterprises of mathematics historical research, philosophy, and empirical science.

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