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THE GREEKS, THE WEST, AND WORLD CULTURE

A Presentation by

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Part 1 of 2

1. INTRODUCTION

The pleasure of addressing you this morning is enhanced by the pleasure of our location—here in the environs of Athens, the seat of ancient Greek civilization, the city where Socrates walked the streets, where Plato founded his Academy and taught Aristotle, and where Aristotle himself lived a major part of his life.

I come to you as a philosopher, and one who is much more indebted to the Greeks than to any other source for such philosophical wisdom as he has attained.

Western philosophy was born here in Greece. In my judgment, the great Greek philosophers of antiquity not only initiated philosophical thought, as other Greek thinkers initiated science and mathematics. They also made a contribution so substantial and so extensive that their successors in the following twenty-five centuries have had little more to add.

The English mathematician and philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead said some years ago that the history of Western thought consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.

I would amend his statement only by saying that most of the footnotes were written by Aristotle.

Let me also mention a statement made recently by an eminent German physicist-philosopher, Carl Friedrich von Weizsacker. Writing about his own study of philosophy and physics, he tells us that it was not until he went back from reading modern philosophers to reading Aristotle and Plato that he experienced genuine enlightenment. He said:

"If one studies Aristotle with some care, one discovers in what measure he was an innovative commentator on Plato... It was only with Aristotle and Plato that I had the experience of people saying something one could understand."

I have chosen to talk to you this morning about the contributions that the Greeks have made to Western civilization and beyond that to world culture—the civilization of all mankind.

Since a world cultural community does not yet exist, I cannot speak to you as a representative of world culture.

Forgive me, therefore, if I speak as a parochial Westerner and about the contributions the Greeks have made to world culture through their influence on Western civilization.

My fondest hope for the future is that it holds out the prospect of a world-wide, global cultural community in which all mankind will participate.

When that occurs I hope that the contributions that the Greeks can make to it through their influence on Western civilization will be fused or merged with the manifold contributions made by the great civilizations of the East, to form the basis for a better human life on earth.

This anticipates the conclusions I will try to reach, with which I hope you will agree.

In order to reach them, I must first prepare the ground by examining with you the four major contributions to Western civilization made by the Greeks and, through the influence of the West, to the future formation of a world cultural community.

Let me do that now.

2. THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE GREEKS

The two fountainheads of Western civilization were in ancient Greece and ancient Israel. But what is unique about Western civilization comes more from its Greek than from its Hebrew source.

Ancient Greece is the intellectual fountainhead of the West. Ancient Israel is its religious fountainhead. I stress those aspects of Western culture that are mainly or wholly Greek in origin, because it is these that most sharply distinguish the West from the East.

The one Hebrew contribution that, 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 Bible is not a philosophical or theological book. Nor is the Koran. These writings have a much closer affinity with the great literature of the East than anything else produced in the West.

Of the four unique contributions made by the Greeks, I wish to mention first their invention of two institutions, the Greek names for which have been translated into all civilized languages to designate institutions first created in Greece.

One of these Greek words is “polis,” which is the name for the city or the state, in sharp contrast to all other forms of human association, especially tribal communities under the dictatorship of the elders or the most powerful individual who ruled as an absolute despot.

The other Greek word is “politeia,” which is the name for a constitution—the framework or charter of constitutional as opposed to despotic government.

The coming into existence of a constitutional or political form of government is inseparable from the coming into existence of a political community—a *polis*, a state, whether that be a city-state, as in the ancient world, or a national-state, as in the modern world.

I would like to add here that the Latin word for “polls” is “civis,” which also means city or state. Civilized life begins with men living in cities.

Inseparable from the idea of the state, and of the constitution and constitutional government, is the idea of citizenship.

Human beings living under absolute and despotic rule, even when that is benevolent rather than despotic, are slaves or subjects, not citizens. They are not persons who are governed with their own consent and with a voice in the government under which they live.

Only citizens, not subjects or slaves, enjoy the blessings of political liberty—to which all human beings have a natural right, because man is by nature a political animal. Human beings become fully civilized only when they live in a *polis*, or political community, and live there as self-governing citizens.

Constitutional government, Aristotle tells us, is the government of free men and equals, in which the citizens rule and are ruled in turn. They rule when they are citizens in public office for a time. They are ruled when they are citizens out of office.

Constitutional government is government by law rather than government by men, limited government rather than absolute government. The rulers do not govern by their own personal power, but rather by the authority and power vested in the political offices they hold by election or appointment. Their authority and power is limited by the constitution that creates these offices and defines their authority and power.

In my judgment, this invention of the Greeks—involving the idea of a state, of a constitution, of constitutional government and citizenship—is, in the sphere of human affairs, as breath-taking a breakthrough in the social life of mankind as the invention of the wheel is a breakthrough in human technology and man's mastery of his environment.

Technology has now become a global, not a parochially Western, factor in human life on earth, even more universal than the existence of states, of constitutional governments and citizenship. This brings me to the second contribution made by the Greeks.

That second contribution is science. “Scientia” is the Latin word which translates the Greek word “episteme—an organized body of knowledge, systematically and rationally developed, often employing mathematics when it is most exact, and whether it is mathematical or not, always tested by reference to empirical evidence and by a critical examination of the cogency and validity of the inferences that are made in the light of the observations available.

Ancient China and ancient India, we know, also made contributions to logic, to mathematics, and to science.

But these contributions tended to be sporadic and unorganized. They did not come together, as they did in the case of Greece, to form systematically developed bodies of knowledge that we, in the modern world, would recognize as the various distinct natural sciences, such as astronomy,

physics, and chemistry, that are the sources of the great technological advances made in modern times by the West.

When in the modern world, we speak of “a scientific attitude” or of “scientific method,” or of “the scientific pursuit of truth” and “the scientific advancement of knowledge,” or of “the applications of scientific knowledge,” which is technology, we are using the word “scientific” in a sense that owes its meaning to the Greek invention and development of science.

Let me add here that the Greek conception of science and of scientific method included four distinct types of human inquiry.

One consisted in the development of formal logic and mathematics, with which it is closely associated.

Another is historical research as a scientifically conducted enterprise. The Greek word “historia” literally means investigation or research. The two great Greek historians—Herodotus and Thucydides—were, first of all, researchers into the past, and only after that narrators of what had occurred in the past.

A third type of inquiry is also named by a Greek word—“philosophia,” which means the pursuit of wisdom, by reflection on common experience and by rational analysis, in order to achieve a better understanding of what everyone knows.

A fourth type of inquiry, which we in the modern world tend to identify as science par excellence, was for the Greeks only one form of science; namely, empirical science, systematic knowledge of natural phenomena that is developed on the basis of special data obtained by carefully controlled and checked observations.

Aristotle’s biological works represent this type of empirical science, extraordinarily rich in their observational content as well as eminently systematic in their analysis of the empirical data then available to him.

Common to these modes of inquiry, which the Greeks regarded as scientific, is the scientific attitude that consists in the maintenance of objectivity on the part of the inquirer.

Objectivity is the essence of the scientific enterprise, which the Greeks originated and Western civilization developed from the groundwork they laid.

Underlying objectivity is the Greek—and Western—conception of truth. Truth is the conformity of the mind to the way things are in reality—a reality independent of the mind, which is what it is regardless of how human beings think about it.

This independent and determinate reality is the measure of what is true in human thought, and the basis of our discrimination between the true and the false.

The investigative, observational, or empirical sciences, and the practical applications of technology to which they have given rise, are one of the most momentous contributions of the Greeks and the West to the world as a whole.

So, too, is the Greek conception of philosophy. All of the great civilizations of the East can rightly claim to include philosophy and religion among their cultural contributions to mankind, but here a crucially important difference must be noted.

In all the great civilizations of the East, religion and philosophy tend to merge. The distinction between them is shadowy, if it exists at all. In addition, philosophy in the East is predominantly a way of life, not a rationally conducted form of inquiry that aims at mankind's improved understanding of nature and society and that ultimately seeks the wisdom we need in order to live well.

These two traits, absent in the East, are uniquely present in the Greek conception of philosophy.

It is sharply distinct from religion. It consists in rationally testable opinions, not beliefs that go beyond the power of reason to check and test.

It is not a way of life, but a mode of thought. It aims at truth in the same way that other forms of objective inquiry aim at the truth.



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