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THE GREEKS, THE WEST, AND WORLD CULTURE

A Presentation by

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This brings me to a third great contribution made by the Greeks, still another that is characterized by a Greek word. That word is “logos,” which is the root of the English word “logic.” “Logos” becomes in the Latin language “ratio,” which is the root of the English word “rational.”

The Greeks invented the dialogue—logical or rational conversation about anything with which human beings are and should be concerned.

The dialogues written by Plato are a uniquely Greek form of literature, and exemplify the virtues of rational conversation as conducted by Socrates.

The Socratic method—the method of the dialogue—is the highest form of teaching ever devised. In my judgment, it is the only form of teaching that is not doctrinaire or dogmatic, the only form of teaching that respects the activity of the learner’s mind as the principal cause of his acquiring knowledge and understanding.

The civilization of the West can be characterized as the civilization of the dialogue—a civilization that, thanks to the Greeks, trusts reason, regards reason as the best tool in man’s possession, and finds in the state, in constitutional government, and in the rule of law, as well as in all forms of scientific inquiry, the best expression of man’s use of reason.

It is a civilization in which the highest ideal of human achievement calls for the best use that human beings 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 enterprises of mathematics, historical research, philosophical thought, and empirical science.

Before going to a fourth contribution made by the Greeks, let me summarize the three I have mentioned so far.

One comprises the institutions of the state, especially constitutional government, citizenship, and political liberty.

A second is the scientific enterprise as a whole, distinguished sharply from religion, conducted co-operatively as a set of methodical procedures to construct distinct bodies of knowledge (mathematics, history, philosophy, and the results of empirical investigations of natural phenomena).

This involves an emphasis on objectivity and on objective truth, which is transcultural, which calls for rational disputation, and which aims at the formulation of principles and conclusions concerning which all human beings can and should be able to agree.

It also involves the development of technology, as a result of the applications that can be made of mathematics and empirical science.

The third contribution is the method of the dialogue, with its ideal of rational discourse—discussion and debate, both in the sphere of politics and in the pursuit of truth.

To these three, I would now like to add a fourth contribution that is uniquely Greek. It was made by the Greek dramas performed in the autumnal season here in Athens and in other Greek cities.

These dramas were called “tragedies,” derived from the Greek word “tragedos,” which means goat-song, the ritualistic music that ushered in the season of the year.

The etymology of the word “tragedy” conceals rather than reveals the contribution made by these dramas.

The contribution consists in what may be called the tragic sense of life, the tragic flaw in the human pursuit of happiness, which for the Greeks meant living well or achieving, in the course of time from birth to death, a good human life.

Aristotle’s unique contribution to ethics or moral philosophy was his understanding of happiness not as a momentary state of contentment produced by the satisfaction of whatever desires a human being happens to have at the moment, but rather as the goodness of a human life as a whole when it is well-lived and involves the attainment of all the things that are really good for man.

That conception of happiness and its pursuit involves the operation of two factors, both necessary, neither sufficient by itself.

One is moral virtue, or a good moral character, which consists in an habitual disposition to aim at the right ultimate end—a good life as a whole—and to make the right choice of the means needed to attain it.

The other indispensable factor is good fortune, which consists in being blessed by a social and physical environment that confers upon the individual goods that he cannot obtain solely by his own power and by the exercise of moral virtue.

Bad fortune, or misfortune, consists in the individual’s deprivation of such goods through no fault of his own -or worse, his suffering of evil through no fault of his own.

That is where tragedy comes in.

Tragedy occurs in human life when an individual is presented by external circumstances beyond his control, with a choice between evils.

He is free to choose one or other, but he must choose one or the other. The choice cannot be avoided, and no matter which of the alternatives the individual freely chooses, he has taken an evil unto himself.

Therein lies the tragedy he suffers—through no fault of his own, unless it be the fault of supposing that he can make the right choice when there is no right choice to make.

The Greek dramas usually portrayed the tragic individual as a prince or ruler, a personage of high estate, upon whom lay the heavy burden of decision-making and with it the incidence of tragic choice and tragedy.

But tragic choice and tragedy enters into the life of every individual—the lowly as well as the highborn.

It also enters into the life of nations, as the tragic dilemmas that confront all the leading states in the contemporary world so plainly show.

I need not add, for it will already have occurred to you, that it also enters into the conduct of private corporations everywhere, especially the multinational corporations—industrial enterprises, businesses, and banks—that are confronted by alternatives as pregnant with tragedy as any of the dilemmas that the great nations face.

3. The Ideal of a World Cultural Community

Let us now consider the shape that the world cultural community of the future should take. To prepare ourselves for doing so, let us first distinguish between the lower and higher elements of civilization.

The lower elements consist of things that are common to all civilized societies, no matter how they otherwise differ culturally, because they are the legacy to civilized man from his pre-historic ancestors.

These are, first of all, tool-making, the use of fire and the cooking of food, burial rites and other ritualistic practises connected with birth, puberty, and marriage.

Along with these go agriculture and the domestication of animals, settled community life with permanent dwellings, the fine as well as the useful arts, and the development of language and other means of communication.

The higher elements consist of those things that distinguish the diverse cultures of historic societies and civilizations—things that are not common to all human cultures.

I will here confine myself to things that markedly differentiate the civilizations of the West from the three or four major civilizations of the Far East.

These are religious beliefs, institutions and practises; social manners and customs with respect to dress, deportment, cuisine, and entertainment; the products of fine art—sculpture, painting, poetry, music, and dance; and the role that logic, science, and philosophy play in human life.

Here, then, is the question that confronts us when we think optimistically about the possible formation in the future of a world cultural community.

In respect to which of the higher elements of human culture is diversity compatible with the ultimate cultural unity of mankind and the cultural fusion out of which a single world culture will eventually emerge from all the diverse cultures that now exist in the world?

My own answer to that question is as follows. Let me submit it to you for your concurrence or disagreement.

I think, first of all, that the political institutions invented by the Greeks and further developed in the West should be the possession of all mankind and formative of a world cultural community.

Second, I think that science, with its emphasis on objectivity and objective truth, as conceived by the Greeks and developed in the West with all its fruitful technological applications, should be a universal possession of mankind and should flourish in a world cultural community.

Third, I suggest, with some hesitation, that a world cultural community should become, as the West has become under the influence of the Greeks, a civilization of the dialogue—a civilization in which rational discourse is honored as the highest form of communication in which human beings can indulge.

Finally, I suggest, most tentatively, that the Aristotelian conception of human happiness and the factors involved in its pursuit, together with the insight of the Greek dramatists concerning the tragedy implicit in human affairs, should become universally accepted as regulative of everyone's effort to achieve a good human life.

What diversities will and should remain in the world cultural community of the future?

My answer is: diversity in religious beliefs and practises, diversity in all the products of fine art, diversity in social manner and customs—diversity with respect to dress, decorum, deportment, cuisine, and entertainment.

May I add that when philosophy is considered mainly as a way of life, as it is in most Far Eastern cultures, it should be a source of diversity in a world cultural community. But when philosophy is conceived, as it was by the Greeks and as it is in the West, as a method of rational inquiry in pursuit of objective truth that, when successful, increases human understanding and wisdom, then philosophical truths should become a common possession of all mankind.

4. *Conclusion*

Permit me now to draw a few conclusions from the points I have made about the Greeks, the West, and world culture.

The four conclusions I wish to present to you are submitted for your consideration. While I would be delighted to have you agree with me, I am prepared to have you disagree.

In either case, the acceptance or rejection of the following four conclusions has crucial consequences for the best and highest hopes we can entertain for the future of mankind on earth.

My first conclusion is that culturalism, like nationalism, is divisive. Both should give way in favor of the unification of the human race, politically as well as culturally, still allowing, of course, for all the institutional and cultural diversities that should remain.

My second conclusion is that cultural differences are like differences in nurture. They are all relatively superficial as compared with the sameness of human nature—the common humanity that inheres in all races of men and in all the peoples on earth.

My third is that some cultural differences—those that pertain to religion, to philosophy as a way of life, to the fine arts, and to social manners and customs—arise from and are appropriate to temperamental and nurtural differences among men. These divide them into different types of human beings.

To the extent that such temperamental and nurtural differences persist after ethnic and national differences are neither diminished nor annulled by the political and cultural unification of mankind, they should persist in the world community of the future.

My final conclusion is as follows:

Insofar as the human mind is the same in all men and insofar as the physical world in which man finds himself are the same of all men, objective truth must be the same for all men.

Hence, the scientific enterprise which aims at objective truth, including here logic, mathematics, history, and philosophy as a mode of rational inquiry, not as a way of life, should become the common possession of mankind.

It should become the core of world culture, for objective truth transcends all divisions and boundaries among men.

THE END



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