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The Ideal vs. the Practical

By: Joshua Power

Ancient Greece is known for its philosophers, playwrights, poets and artists. Ancient Rome is known for its arches, roads, and aqueducts. Throughout their interdependent histories, the ancient Greek and Roman societies shared a vast amount of knowledge and ideas, but the way they used their knowledge varied drastically. The primary difference between the worldview of the Greeks and that of the Romans is that the Romans strove for success through practicality in all of their endeavors. On the other hand, the Greeks, in particular the Athenians were idealists who thought that success would follow moral and academic superiority.

The idealism of the Greeks shines through in *The Funeral Oration of Pericles*. In this oration, Pericles describes what he believes makes Athens great. He speaks of how the Athenian government, “respects the majority and not the few; but while the law secures equality to all alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized.”(Lualdi 58) Throughout this speech, Pericles outlines how the greatness of the Athenians is due to the fact that they are honorable in all that they do. They do not get angry at one another over petty things. They have the leisure to create beautiful art and contemplate philosophy, yet still retain a curiosity of the physical world. The Athenian personage that Pericles describes is almost reminiscent of a Renaissance man- active not only in the household but also in learning, art, and politics. The true uniqueness of this personage is the fact that Pericles is describing the average citizen, not the elite of society. While the extent to which the Athenian citizen directly had a role in governing his state was somewhat unique among the Greeks, they all shared a remarkable unity amongst the social classes. As Pericles puts it, “To avow poverty with us is no disgrace,”(Lualdi 59) and
that shone through in the fact that after the tyrannical governments ran their course, there was almost no class warfare in the Greek city-states. All citizens were truly respected as equals.

The Romans on the other hand, fell prey to internal strife due to the fact that as a whole, they did not treat all Roman citizens as equals. When Plutarch discusses the Gracchan reforms attempted by Tiberius Gracchus, he shows how the rich Roman citizens considered themselves above the impoverished. Plutarch states that, “though this reformation was managed with so much tenderness… the moneyed men, and those of great estates, were exasperated, through their covetous feelings,”(Lualdi 118) that their ill-gotten gains were to be returned to the small farmers who were the life-blood of the Republic. The Roman legal system was restricted to the elite from the beginning, whereas the Athenians valued each citizen in the law making process. While the Roman government gradually opened up to the average citizen in theory through the council of plebs, in practice, this council just began the formation of a new elite consisting of the richest of both the Patricians and the Plebeians. The disparity between the rich and poor that existed in Rome highlights how the Romans did not look at all citizens as equal, even if they technically abided by the same laws. The Romans’ lack of equality owing to a more materialistic view of the world eventually lead to internal strife and civil war, whereas the Greeks’ idealist view of all citizens as equals allowed the governments of city-states to remain internally stable.

Another area where the idealism of the Greeks shone through was in their art. In all of its various forms, Greek art attempted to be a representation of a perfect reality. Rather than depicting what actually was, Greek artists depicted what could be; they showed excellence to strive towards. This ideal can be seen in many Greek sculptures, such as Myron’s Discus Thrower (Lualdi 61) and Polyclitus’ Doryphoros (Spielvogel 80). These sculptures depict a perfect image of the human form; they are well muscled, active and fluid, and free from any
wrinkles and blemishes. Roman sculptors, on the other hand, were interested in showing a subject as it actually existed- the bust of Brutus on page 109 of Lualdi’s sources, for example, comes complete with wrinkles, a slight frown, and even one ear slightly larger than the other. This realistic depiction is consistent with the Roman view that centered on practicality- on a grounded reality over an abstract ideal.

Theatre in ancient Greece spanned both comedies and tragedies, but during the Golden Age of Greece, both of these forms included lessons for the audience. The comedy *Lysistrata*, for example, is very humorous; hidden within that humor though, is a somber warning from Aristophanes to the leaders of Athens. In the play, Lysistrata implies the potential destruction of Athens and all of Greece if the Peloponnesian war continues (Lualdi 76-77). Her prediction turned out to be all too accurate considering both the outcome of that war and the conquests of Philip and the Macedonians during the next century. In line with other Greek playwrights of the time, Aristophanes used theatre to further his ideals.

Roman theatre, on the other hand, sought purely to entertain and delight an audience. Roman playwrights consistently took significant plot elements from new Greek comedies. The new Greek works, products of Hellenistic society, had already moved away from the more meaningful themes of Golden Age plays by the time that the Romans discovered them. The result of the Roman reworking of the new Greek plays were theatrical works with the sole purpose of entertainment. While the old Greek playwrights sought to instill their ideals in the minds of the citizens who viewed them, Roman playwrights had the practical objective of satisfying the plebeian masses, preventing riot, and earning money for themselves (Spielvogel 133).
The study of science varied widely from Greek to Roman society. The Greeks studied theoretical sciences and mathematics among other things, writing theorems and proofs for mathematical laws. It is clear from Archimedes' letter to Eratosthenes at Alexandria that the Greeks, even in the Hellenistic Period, valued knowledge for its own sake, beyond just its practical application. In this letter, Archimedes includes not just the theorems that he has developed, but also the proofs and processes by which he developed the theorems. His purpose is to enlighten Eratosthenes to his methodology, in the hopes that Eratosthenes might develop his own theorems in the future. Archimedes is seeking not just his own benefit, but the betterment and enlightenment of the world (Lualdi 98-99).

Unlike the study of science in Greece, Roman research focused primarily on practical applications. The Romans excelled in the sciences of engineering and architecture; Roman arches, roads, and aqueducts are known the world over for their well-designed durability. Another area in which Roman technology was particularly well developed was in weaponry. In Julius Caesar’s account of the capture of Alesia, he describes how his victory was due not just to the courage and skill of his men, but also to the technology that he had available to fight the Gauls. He tells how his forces created a giant siege works, used grappling hooks, ditches, traps, walls, and other devices (Lualdi 120-123) which would be used for centuries to come by conquering military powers, such as Attila and the Huns.

The ancient Greeks were at the forefront of philosophy in the ancient world. Teachings of great thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus drove Greek thought forward as the philosophers sought both natural and metaphysical truth. The Greek idealism is particularly eminent in Plato’s Republic, in which he seeks to determine what justice is, and also why men should act justly. His argument drops personal gain as a reward for acting justly, and focuses on
why it is morally right to act in such a way (Plato). Roman philosophy on the other hand, was wholly non-existent until Roman conquests brought Roman nobles into contact with Greek thinkers. Most of the Roman philosophy that developed was based around rhetoric, with the practical goal of furthering one's political career (Spielvogel 143).

From the forms of government that they developed to the science that they studied, from the art that they created to the philosophy (or lack thereof) that they contemplated, it is clear that the worldviews of the Greeks and Romans differed heavily. The Greeks were idealists; they thought that they would be successful as a people by striving towards excellence together. The Romans claimed to have similar ideas about success, but it is clear through the institutions that they developed and through the actions of numerous individuals that in general, Romans valued personal success and material gain over collective rule that benefitted all of Rome (Spielvogel 138). The fall of the Roman Republic was due mainly to the striving of individuals to get ahead, but the mindset that those individuals held was due in large part to the fact that as a people, the Romans held practicality above their ideals.
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