

Introduction to Ancient Greek History

Now, I'm going to ask you this question, why are you here? That is to say why should you, we, all of us want to study these ancient Greeks? I think it's reasonable for people who are considering the study of a particular subject in a college course to ask why they should. What is it about the ancient Greeks between the years that I mentioned to you that deserves the attention of the people in the 21st century? I think the answer is to be found, or at least one answer, the truth is there are many answers, and some of it is that it's just terribly interesting. But that's very much of a, what's the word I want, the opposite of objective, subjective observation by me. So I would say a less subjective one is that I believe that it comes from their position, that is to say the position of the Greeks, at the most significant starting point of western civilization. Which is the culture that most powerfully shapes not only the west, but most of the world today. It seems to me to be evident that whatever its other characteristics, the west has created institutions of government and law that provide unprecedented freedom for its people. It has also invented a body of natural, scientific knowledge and technological achievement that together, make possible a level of health and material prosperity undreamed of in earlier times and unknown outside the west and those places that have been influenced by the west. I think the Nobel Prize laureate V. S. Nighpaul, a man born in Trinidad of Indian parents was right when he spoke of the modern world as our universal civilization shaped chiefly by the west. Most people around the world who know of them want to benefit from the achievements of western science and technology. Many of them also want to participate in its political freedom. Moreover, experiences suggest that a society cannot achieve the full benefits of western science and technology without a commitment to reason and objectivity as essential to knowledge and to the political freedom that sustains it and helps it to move forward. The primacy of reason and the pursuit of objectivity therefore both characteristic of the western experience seem to me to be essential for the achievement of the desired goals almost anywhere in the world. The civilization of the west however was not the result of some inevitable process through which other cultures will automatically pass. It emerged from a unique history in which chance and accident often played a vital part. The institutions and the ideas therefore that provide for freedom and improvement in the material conditions of life cannot take root and flourish without an understanding of how they can about and what challenges they have had to surmount. Non-western peoples who wish to share in the things they characterize modernity will need to study the ideas and history of western civilization to achieve what they want. And westerners I would argue who wish to preserve these things must do the same. The many civilizations adopted by the human race have shared basic characteristics most have tended towards cultural uniformity and stability. Reason, although it was employed for all sorts of practical and intellectual purposes in some of these cultures, it still lacked independence from religion, and it lacked a high status to challenge the most basic received ideas. Standard form of government has been monarchy. Outside the west, republics have been unknown, rulers have been thought to be divine or appointed spokesmen for divinity. Religious and political institutions and beliefs have been thoroughly intertwined as a mutually supportive, unified structure. Government has not been subject to secular reasoned analysis. It is rested on religious authority, tradition, and power. The concept of individual freedom has had no importance in these great majority of cultures in human history. The first and the sharpest break with this common human experience came in ancient Greece. The Greek city-states called Polates, were republics, the differences in wealth among their citizens were relatively small. There were no kings, but the wealth to hire mercenary soldiers so the citizens had to do their own fighting and to decide when to fight. As independent defenders of the common safety and the common interests, they demanded a role in the most

important political decisions. In this way for the first time, political life really was invented, observed that the word "political" derives from the Greek word "polace." Before that no word was needed because there was no such thing. This political life came to be shared by a relatively large portion of the people and participation in political life was highly valued by the Greeks. Such states of course, did not need a bureaucracy, for there were no vast, royal, or state holdings that needed management and not much economic surplus to support a bureaucratic class. There was no separate casts of priests and there was very little concern, I don't mean no concern, but very little concern with life after death, which was universally important in other civilizations. In this varied dynamic, secular, and remarkably free context, there arose for the first time a speculative, natural, philosophy based on observation and reason. The root of modern natural science and philosophy, free to investigate or to ignore divinity. What most sets the Greeks apart is their view of the world. Where other peoples have seen sameness and continuity, the Greeks and the errors of their way of thinking have tended to notice disjunction and to make distinctions. The Greek way of looking at things requires a change from the characteristic way of knowing things before the Greeks, that is to say the use of faith, poetry, and intuition, and instead, increasingly the Greeks focused on a reliance on reason. Reason permits a continuing rational inquiry into the nature of reality. Unlike mystical insights, scientific theories cannot be arrived at by meditation alone, but require accurate observation of the world and reasoning of a kind that other human beings can criticize, analyze, modify, and correct. The adoption of this way of thinking was the beginning of the liberation and enthronement of reason to whose searching examination, the Greeks thereafter exposed everything they perceived, natural, human, and divine. From the time they formed their republics until they were conquered by alien empires, the Greeks also rejected monarchy of any kind. They thought that a human being functioning in its full capacity must live as a free man in an autonomous polace, ruled by laws that were the product of the political community, and not of an arbitrary fiat from some man or god. These are ideas about laws and justice that have simply not flourished outside the western tradition, until places that were outside the western tradition were influenced by the west. The Greeks however, combined a unique sense of mankind's high place in the natural order. The Greeks had the most arrogant view of their relationship to the divinities as I will tell you about later in the course, of any people I know. So on the one hand, they had this very high picture of this place of man, and what possibilities human beings had before them, and they combined it with a painful understanding of the limitations of the greatness and the possibilities before man. This combination of elevating the greatness in reality and possibility of human beings with the limitations of it, the greatest limitations being mortality. That together composes the tragic vision of the human condition that characterized classical Greek civilization. To cope with it, they urged human beings to restrain their overarching ambitions. Inscribed at Apollo's temple, the tablet of del fi, which became what the Greeks came to call it, the navel of the universe. It certainly became the center of the Greek world which was also seen as a central place of importance by non-Greeks who are on the borders of the Greek world. That tablet of del fi has written above the temple these words, "know thyself," and another statement, "nothing in excess." I think those together really mean this, "Know your own limitations, as a fallible mortal. And then, exercise moderation, because you are not divine, you are mortal." Beyond these exhortations they relied on good political regime to enable human beings to fulfil the capacities that were part of their nature, to train them in virtue, and to restrain them from vice. Aristotle and his politics made the point neatly and I quote him, "As man is the best of the animals when perfected, so he is the worst when separated from law and justice. For injustice is most dangerous when it is armed, and man, armed by nature with good sense and virtue, may use them for entirely opposite ends. Therefore, when he is

without virtue, man is the most unscrupulous and savage of the animals.” Aristotle went on to say that the justice needed to control this dark side of human nature can be found only in a well ordered society of free people who govern themselves, and the only one that he knew was the polace of the Greeks. Now the second great strand in the history of the west is the Judao-Christian tradition. A very different tradition from the one I’ve just described. Christianity’s main roots were in Judaism, a religion that worshipped a single, all powerful deity who is sharply separate from human beings, makes great moral demands upon them, and judges them all, even kings and emperors. Christianity began as a persecuted religion that ultimately captured the Roman Empire only after centuries of hostility towards the empire, toward Rome, towards the secular state in general. And it never lost entirely its original character as an insurgent movement. Independent of the state and hostile to it, making claims that challenged the secular authority. This too is unique to the west, just like the Greek experiences unique, this kind of religious organization is to be found nowhere else in human society. So, the union of a Universalist religion with a monarch, such as the Roman Empire who ruled a vast empire, could none the less have put an end to any prospect of freedom as in other civilizations. But, Christianity’s inheritance of the rational, disputatious Greek philosophy lead to powerfully divisive quarrels about the nature of God and other theological questions, which was perfectly in the tradition, and uniquely in the tradition of Greek philosophical debate. What I’m doing is making a claim that even the Judao-Christian tradition, which is such a different one from the Greeks, and in so many ways seems to be at odds with it. Even they were dependent on one aspect of the Greek culture which is inherent in Christianity and important in Christianity. That too was ultimately a Greek source. Well, the people whom the Romans called barbarians destroyed the western empire and then also destroyed the power of the emperors and their efforts to impose religious and political conformity under imperial control. The emperor in the east was able to that because they were not conquered by the barbarians, but in the west you have this situation where nobody is fully in charge. And here we have arrived at a second sharp break with the general experience of mankind. The rest of the dramatic tribes that have toppled the Roman Empire was weak and it was divided. The barriers to unity presented by European geography and very limited in technology made it hard for a would-be conqueror to create a vast empire, eliminating competitors and imposing his will over vast areas. These conditions permitted the development of institutions and habits needed for freedom, even as they also made Europe vulnerable to conquest and to extinction in Europe was almost extinguished practically before there was Europe, very early in its history. The Christian church might have stepped into the breach, and imposed obedience and uniformity because before terribly long, all of the west had been Christianized. But the church in fact never gained enough power to control the state. Strong enough to interfere with the ambitions of emperors and kings, it never was able to impose its own domination, though some of the popes sure tried. Nobody sought or planned for freedom, but in the spaces that were left by the endless conflicts among secular rulers and between them and the church, there was room for freedom to grow. Freedom was kind of an accident which came about because the usual ways of doing things were not possible. Into some of that space towns and cities reappeared and with them new supports for freedom. Taking advantage of the rivalries I mentioned, they obtained charters from the local powers establishing their rights to conduct their own affairs and to govern themselves. In Italy, some of these cities were able to gain control of the surrounding country and they became city-states, resembling those of the ancient Greeks. Their autonomy was assisted by the continuing struggle between popes and emperors, between church and state. Again, a thoroughly unique western experience. In these states the modern world began to take form. Although the people were mainly Christians, their life and outlook became increasingly secular.

Here and not only in Italy but in other cities north of the Alps, arose a worldview that celebrated the greatness and dignity of mankind, which was a very sharp turning away from the medieval western tradition that put God and life in the hereafter at the center of everything. This new vision is revealed with flamboyant confidence by Pico Della Mirandola, a Florentine thinker, who wrote the following, "God told man that we [meaning God] have made of neither of Heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice as though the maker and molder of thy self. Thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Oh supreme generosity of God the father, oh highest and the most great felicity of man, to him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills." Now this is a remarkable leap, even beyond the humanism of the Greeks, something brand new in the world. According to this view man is not merely the measure of all things as the Greek Sophist protagonist had radically proclaimed in the 5th century. He is in fact says Pico more than immortal, he is unlimited by nature, he is entirely free to shape himself and to acquire whatever he wants. Please observe too that it is not his reason that will determine human actions, but his will alone, free of the moderating control of reason. Another Florentine, Machiavelli, moved further in the same direction. For him, and I quote him, "Fortune is a woman and it is necessary to hold her down, and beat her, and fight with her." A notion that the Greeks would have regarded as dangerously arrogant and certain to produce disaster. They would have seen this as an example of the word that they use, and we'll talk about it a lot in this courses, "Hugress," this kind of violent arrogance which comes upon men when they see themselves as more than human and behave as though they were divine. Francis Bacon, influenced by Machiavelli, urged human beings to employ their reasoning to force nature to give up its secrets to treat nature like a woman, to master nature in order to improve man's material wellbeing. He assumed that such a course would lead to progress and the general improvement of the human condition, and it was that sort of thinking that lay at the heart of the scientific revolution, and remains the faith on which modern science and technology rest. Couple of other English political philosophers, Hobbs and Locke, applied a similar novelty and modernity to the sphere of politics, basing their understanding on the common passions of man for a comfortable self-preservation. And discovering something the Greeks had never thought of, something they call natural rights that belong to a man either as part of nature or as the gift of a benevolent and reasonable God. Man was seen as a solitary creature, not inherently apart of society, that's totally un-Greek, and his basic rights were seen to be absolute, for nothing must interfere with the right of each individual to defend his life, liberty, and property. Freedom was threatened in early modern times by the emergence of monarchies that might have been able to crush it, but the cause of individual freedom was enhanced by the protestant reformation. Another upheaval within Christianity arising from its focus on individual salvation, its inheritance of a tradition of penetrable reasoning, applied even to matters of faith, and to the continuing struggle between church and state. The English revolution came about in large part because of King Charles I's attempt to impose an alien religious conformity, as well as tighter political control on his kingdom. But, in England the tradition of freedom bound by law was already strong enough to produce effective resistance. From the ensuing rebellion came limited constitutional representative government, and ultimately our modern form of democracy. The examples and the ideas it produced encouraged and informed the French and the American revolutions and the entire modern constitutional tradition. These ideas and institutions are the basis for modern, liberal thinking about politics, the individual, and society. Just as the confident view of science and technology as progressive forces, improving the lot of humanity and increasing man's capacity to understand and control the universe has been the most powerful form taken by the western elevation of reasoning. In the last two

centuries, both these most characteristic elements of western civilization have in fact become increasingly under heavy attack. At different times, science and technology have been blamed for the destruction of human community and the alienation of people from nature and from one another, for intensifying gulf between rich and poor, for threatening the very existence of humanity either by producing weapons of total destruction or by destroying the environment. At the same time, the foundations of freedom have also come into question. Jefferson and his colleagues could confidently proclaim their political rights as being self-evident and the gift of a creator. By now in our time however, the power of religion has faded, and for many the basis of modern political and moral order has been demolished. Nietzsche announced the death of God and Dostoevsky's grand inquisitor asserted that when God is dead, all things are permitted. Nihilism rejects any objective basis for society and its morality. It rejects the very concept of objectivity, it even rejects the possibility of communication itself. In a vulgar form of Nihilism, I claim, has a remarkable influence in our educational system today, a system rotting from the head down. So, chiefly in universities, but all the way down to elementary schools. The consequences of the victories of consequences I believe, would be enormous. If both religion and reason are removed, all that remains is will and power, where the only law is the law of tooth and claw. There is no protection for the freedom of weaker individuals or those who question the authority of the most powerful. There is no basis for individual rights, or for a critique of existing ideas and institutions if there is no base either in religion or in reason. That such a tax on the greatest achievements of the west should be made by western intellectuals is perfectly in keeping with the western tradition. The first crowd to do stuff like that you will find in the 5th century B.C. in Greece, in a movement called the Sophistic movement. These Sophes raised most of the questions that my colleagues are now spending all their time with now. Yet, to me it seems ironic that they have gained so much currency in a time, more or less, in which the achievements of western reason in the form of science and in a moment when it's concept of political freedom seemed to be more popular and more desirable to people in and out of western civilization than ever. Now I've been saying kind things about western civilization, but I would not want to deny that there is a dark side to the western experience and its way of life. To put untrammelled reason and individual freedom at the center of a civilization, is to live with the conflict, the turmoil, the instability, and the uncertainty that these things create. Freedom was born and has survived in the space created by divisions and conflict within and between nations and religions. We must wonder whether the power of modern weapons will allow it and the world to survive at such a price. Individual freedom, although it has greatly elevated the condition of the people who have lived in new societies, inevitably permits inequalities which are the more galling because each person is plainly free to try to improve his situation, and largely responsible for the outcome. Freedom does permit isolation from society and an alienation of the individual at a high cost, both to the individual and the society. And these are not the only problems posed by the western tradition in its modern form which is what we live in. Whether it takes the shape of the unbridled claims of Pico Della Mirandola's assertion of the power of the superior individual to transform and shape his own nature. Or of the modern totalitarian effort to change the effort of humanity by utopian social engineering. The temptation to arrogance offered by the ideas and worldly success of the modern west threatens its own great traditions and achievements. Because of western civilization's emergence as the exemplary civilization, it also presents problems to the whole world. The challenges presented by freedom and the predominance of reason cannot be ignored, nor can they be met by recourse to the experience of others culture, where these characteristics have not been prominent. In other words, to understand and cope with the problems that we all face, we all need to know and to grapple with the

western experience. In my view, we need especially to examine the older traditions of the west that came before the modern era and to take seriously the possibility that useful wisdom can be founded, especially among the Greeks who began it all. They understood the potentiality of human beings, their limitations, and the predicaments in which they live. Man is potent and important, yet he is fallible and mortal, capable of the greatest achievements and the worst crimes. He is then a tragic figure, powerful but limited with freedom to choose to act, but bound by his own nature, knowing that he will never achieve perfect knowledge and understanding, justice, and happiness, but determined to continue the search no matter what. To me, that seems an accurate description of the human condition that is meaningful, not only for the Greeks and their heirs in the west, but for all human beings. It is an understanding that cannot be achieved without a serious examination of the western experience. The abandonment of such a study, or its adulteration for current political purposes, would be a terrible loss for all of humanity, and at the base, at the root of that civilization stood the Greeks. These are the reasons why I examine their experience, and I trust why you are thinking about learning about it. Thank you, I'll see you guys, some of you, next Tuesday.