



# Western Civilization from Prehistory to 1650

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## TOPIC 4.2. GREEK CULTURE: FROM MYTH TO REASON

Supplement to Chambers, *The Western Experience*, Chapter 2: The Forming of Greek Civilization, pp. 37-66, or McKay, *A History of Western Society*, Chapter 3: The Legacy of Greece, pp. 78-91.

<b>WESTERN WORLD VIEW</b>	Greek history, literature, religion, and philosophy moved from myth-making to systematic, self-conscious, rational thought. Without a doubt, it is to the Greeks that we are most indebted for originating the Western world-view.
<b>GREEK LITERATURE</b> <b>Homer</b> <b>Hesiod</b>	Set during the mythic Mycenaean past, HOMER'S <i>ILIAD</i> AND <i>ODYSSEY</i> explore dimensions of human personality and themes of pride, justice, and universal order that later thinkers would treat more systematically. In <i>Theogony</i> and <i>Works and Days</i> , HESIOD, like Homer, examined ideas of justice and universal order. He also considered the origin of the universe and of good and evil, issues later thinkers would examine through rational thought.
<b>OLYMPIAN RELIGION</b> <b>Human Gods</b> <b>Lacked Dogmas,</b> <b>Priestly Class,</b> <b>and Morality</b>	Both poets explored their themes in terms of the myths and deities of OLYMPIAN RELIGION. Succeeding earlier cults, this religion gained broad appeal throughout Greece. Lacking fixed dogmas and priestly classes, Olympian religion, with its all-too-HUMAN GODS, also lacked moral standards by which people could live their lives. In response, some Greeks gradually grew to imagine Zeus as arbiter of morality and justice. Others turned to the Eleusinian and Orphic mysteries. Founded upon myths of death and rebirth, these cults emphasized ritual purification and emotional experience, offering adherents the promise of eternal life that Olympian religion did not.
<b>GREEK DRAMA</b> <b>Dionysus</b>	Originating in rituals to honor the god of wine, DIONYSUS, GREEK DRAMA combined music, language, and pageantry into a form of public emotional and intellectual experience. As playwrights added more actors to the original chorus, tragedy in particular came to resemble philosophical dialogue through which the characters and, by extension, the audience achieved insight into human nature and universal truths.
<b>Aeschylus</b> <b>Sophocles</b>	The first famous tragedian, AESCHYLUS, examined individual psychology to explore themes of vengeance, justice, and law. SOPHOCLES examined character in terms of an explicit
<b>Euripides</b>	Theory of Proportions: characters such as Oedipus who ignorantly or inappropriately asserted themselves and suffered crushing realizations about their true relationship to fate. EURIPIDES examined contemporary events with logical rigor and questioned conventional assumptions and values. His plays display a deep concern for human suffering and a tragic vision of reason succumbing to all-consuming passion. ARISTOPHANES also wrote plays of social and political commentary, but from a conservative viewpoint. His comedies attacked social critics for what he viewed as their assault on traditional Athenian values.
<b>Aristophanes</b>	
<b>GREEK HISTORY</b> <b>Herodotus</b>	Greek historians displayed a similar spirit by searching for the rational causes of notable events. Examining the Persian Wars, HERODOTUS discovered universal moral and behavioral principles at work behind this clash of world views. Like good modern historians, Herodotus asked probing questions of the past, treated his sources critically, and tried to present evidence objectively. Even so, his mythopoeic turn of mind caused him to place as much value on dreams and omens as on objective evidence. In his history of the Peloponnesian War, THUCYDIDES rejected all mythic explanations. He brought philosophical rigor to bear on the events of the war, searching for the patterns of human behavior that drove them.
<b>Thucydides</b>	
<b>SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY</b>	The MYTHOPOEIC THOUGHT of Olympian religion gradually gave way to SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY. Although philosophy never supplanted religion entirely, it enabled many thinkers to move beyond mythic explanations of the universe and arrive at ones based on self-conscious rational methods of inquiry.

<p><b>Materialists</b></p>	<p>The early MATERIALISTS, such as THALES, PYTHAGORAS, AND DEMOCRITUS, developed rational accounts of nature in terms of imperishable substances, mathematical principles, or the properties of atoms.</p>
<p><b>Hippocrates</b></p>	<p>Similarly, HIPPOCRATES and his followers rejected mythic-religious explanations of disease and observed symptoms in order to identify their natural causes.</p>
<p><b>Sophists</b></p>	<p>Against the Materialists, the SOPHISTS argued that speculation about the universe was futile. Instead, these thinkers scrutinized people and society and instructed men in the art of rhetoric. Protagoras and other Sophists examined questions of ethics, law, and morality, but they were PHILOSOPHICAL RELATIVISTS whose critical method undermined traditional authority.</p>
<p><b>ATHENIAN PHILOSOPHERS Universal Principles</b></p>	<p>Greek philosophy reached its height in the Athenian thinkers SOCRATES, PLATO, and ARISTOTLE. Unlike the Sophists, these philosophers shared the view that UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES do exist and that those are available to the rational mind.</p>
<p><b>SOCRATES Dialectical Method</b></p>	<p>SOCRATES sought to discover those principles through rigorous DIALECTICAL DISCUSSION that forced his students to participate in the process of acquiring wisdom. During the chaos of the Peloponnesian War, he spent most of his time on the streets, in the marketplace, and in the gymnasias, engaging young and old people in dialogues.</p>
<p><b>Absolute Truth Knowledge is Virtue</b></p>	<p>According to Socrates, objective reality and what our minds understand of reality are separated by a great mental divide. But rational inquiry, meticulously yet humbly pursued (his dialectical method), could close this divide. In using rational methods of inquiry, human mind and soul could be brought to discover ABSOLUTE TRUTH and goodness – and personal happiness. Socrates felt optimistic that knowing the truly good would necessarily direct a person to act in line with this knowledge. He believed that KNOWLEDGE IS VIRTUE and that the quest for such knowledge was the very heart of life itself – its highest form (almost a divine enterprise).</p>
<p><b>PLATO World of Ideas</b></p>	<p>Though he sought to train morally self-aware minds, his challenging method gained him enemies who ultimately prosecuted him and forced him to commit suicide. In 399 BC he was accused of corrupting youth and neglecting the gods. He was convicted and sentenced to death. He spent his last days patiently discussing philosophy with his friends. Then he drank the poison cup of hemlock that the jailer brought him and died in peace.</p>
<p><b>PLATO World of Ideas</b></p>	<p>PLATO located universal principles, which he called IDEAS OR FORMS, in a higher realm of true Being. The goal of philosophy, he argued, is to train the mind to perceive these Forms and the ETERNAL TRUTH they contain.</p>
<p><b>The Academy</b></p>	<p>Embittered by the execution of his teacher, Plato left Athens to travel and study in Italy, Sicily and probably North Africa. When he returned to Athens, he opened a school called the ACADEMY. Plato expressed his philosophic thinking in many written dialogues which rank among the greatest literary and philosophic masterpieces of all times.</p>
<p><b>Being vs. Becoming</b></p>	<p>Plato divided the cosmos into two separate regions: the world of <i>BEING</i>, and the world of <i>BECOMING</i>. The former he regarded as perfect, unchanging, the essence of what he called <i>Ideas</i>. Truth, justice, beauty, virtue, etc., existed in perfection in the World of Ideas. To Plato, the World of Ideas was the real world. The world of <i>BECOMING</i>, the material world, though seeming real to our senses, was only an illusion. Plato used his famous <a href="#"><i>Allegory of the Cave</i></a> to make the distinction between ILLUSION AND REALITY.</p>
<p><b>Illusion vs. Reality</b></p>	<p>Plato used his famous <a href="#"><i>Allegory of the Cave</i></a> to make the distinction between ILLUSION AND REALITY.</p>
<p><b>Particulars vs. Universals</b></p>	<p>To Plato's way of thinking, the world around us that our senses perceive directly is an ever-changing, coming-and-going array of "PARTICULAR" things: the tree in our front yard, our neighbor next door, the dog digging in the back yard, the beds and chairs in our house, the meal we are just about to sit down to, the yellow-orange sunset this evening, etc. These earthly things, these "particulars," have the sad quality of changing, aging, breaking down. There is</p>

<p><b>Contemplation</b></p>	<p>nothing on earth that is permanent, lasting, or eternal. Nothing on earth is real.</p> <p>But there is a realm of such Reality which exists beyond our earthly domain in the realm of the gods, in the realm of heaven. This is the unseen world of the "Forms" or Ideas." In this world beyond exist a multitude of God-created Forms or Ideas or "UNIVERSALS" – such as Good, Truth, Beauty. They exist in perfection, just like the idea of a perfect circle, or the perfect relationship between the radius of a circle and its circumference, in pure mathematical-like precision. They are real, very real, the most real of all reality. They have transcendent and universal existence – like gods!</p> <p>For Plato, the challenge facing us is to bring ourselves to the knowledge of such perfection. This was the highest calling of a human – to meditate on such perfection. Being occupied in such CONTEMPLATION was the mark of true nobility in a person. Plato indeed felt that such noble thinkers (philosophers such as himself) should even be given the role of leading or governing the rest of society.</p>
<p><b>Philosopher-Kings</b></p>	<p>Plato was highly suspicious of democratic governments (like that in Athens), which he saw as susceptible to being guided by popular passions and prejudices rather than intellectual virtue. He built a theory of the just state on universal principles. Since only the best-trained minds can grasp these principles, only a philosophical elite, appropriately educated (i.e., PHILOSOPHER-KINGS) can rule with true wisdom and moderation. In Plato's <i>Republic</i>, power was organized hierarchically, with most power being given to the wise philosopher-kings. The rest of society found their places below such rule according to rational principles of authoritarian community organization – something similar to the Spartan model.</p>
<p><b>ARISTOTLE</b> <b>Synthesis:</b> <b>Universal</b> <b>Principles +</b> <b>Natural</b> <b>Phenomena</b></p>	<p>ARISTOTLE synthesized the concept of UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES he inherited from Socrates and Plato with the Materialists' attention to NATURAL PHENOMENA. He applied this SYNTHESIS to both ethics and politics. In both areas, by considering specific problems and examples, he offered a realistic assessment of human nature and practical guidelines for how people could make moral decisions and live happily in well-governed communities.</p>
<p><b>Alexander</b> <b>Lyceum</b></p>	<p>Born in Stagira in northern Greece, Aristotle went to Athens and studied under Plato for about twenty year. In 342 BC, King Philip of Macedonia called him to Pella to tutor his son, ALEXANDER. After Alexander became king, Aristotle returned to Athens and established his school, the LYCEUM.</p>
<p><b>Visible World</b></p>	<p>Aristotle went in a direction opposite that of his teacher, Plato. While Plato focused his attentions on the mysterious world of the perfect Forms, Aristotle focused his attentions on the messier VISIBLE WORLD immediately around him. Aristotle was greatly fascinated by this empirical or physical world. He was looking for Plato's Forms within this visible world.</p>
<p><b>Abstractions</b></p>	<p>But Aristotle eventually surmised that these Forms were merely ABSTRACTIONS in our mind which we use to categorize the immense information that comes to us about the surrounding world. The Forms, though useful to human logic, were themselves only mental constructs. They had no separate existence like gods or defining spirits (as Plato had asserted).</p>
<p><b>Earth vs. Heavens</b></p>	<p>However, when it came to discussion of things beyond this earthly realm – the heavenly realm of the sun, moon and stars – Aristotle evidenced a religious awe. Though the earth might be marked with physical imperfections, these heavenly bodies were the essence of the divine, for they were perfect in their circular shape and movement. Thus for Aristotle the perfect-imperfect dualism in life occurred not between things seen and unseen (as it had for Plato), but between the imperfect things seen on EARTH and the perfect things seen in the HEAVENS. Thus even in his religion, Aristotle remained focused on the visible universe around him.</p>
<p><b>Syllogism</b></p>	<p>Aristotle wrote a major work on logic in which he described and analyzed the now familiar syllogistic form of argument. A SYLLOGISM is an argument consisting of three parts, a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. For example:</p>

<p><b>Classification</b></p> <p><b>Ethics</b></p> <p><b>LEGACY</b>  <b>Autonomy of Reason</b>  <b>Scientific Inquiry</b>  <b>Basis for Theology</b></p> <p><b>ONLINE RESOURCES</b></p>	<p>All men are mortal. (Major premise)  Socrates is a man. (Minor premise)  Therefore: Socrates is mortal.(Conclusion)</p> <p>or</p> <p>No Greeks are black. (Major premise)  Some men are Greeks. (Minor premise)  Therefore: Some men are not black. (Conclusion)</p> <p>Aristotle's doctrine of the syllogism was the beginning of formal logic. Aristotle was the recognized authority in logic for over two thousand years. He thought that by setting out any suggested argument in syllogistic form, it should be possible to avoid all fallacies.</p> <p>Just as he classified logic so he tried to analyze and CLASSIFY ALL SUBJECTS, from political constitutions to forms of motion, as well the animal kingdom. He collected all knowledge of his time and divided it into new branches of learning. Thus organized science began.</p> <p>Finally, in his <a href="#">Nicomachaen Ethics</a>, he defined happiness as “an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” and virtue as the mean the between two extremes.</p> <p>In laying the groundwork of Western thought, Greek thinkers established the principle of the AUTONOMY OF REASON. They also developed the subfields of philosophy, posed enduring questions, and pioneered the methods of SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY. Further, they shaped the course of Christianity by providing the TERMINOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES CHRISTIAN THINKERS used to develop a systematic theology. Although these theologians argued that reason was subject to God's revelation, confidence in reason's power never fully disappeared, and it ultimately reasserted its autonomy in the modern world.</p> <p>Adapted from <a href="#">Humanities in the Western Tradition</a> by Marvin Perry, <a href="#">The Greek Quest for Ideal Order</a> by Miles Hodges, and <a href="#">Hyper-History Online</a>.</p> <p>For more information on Greek Culture, explore one or more of the following online resources:</p> <p><a href="#">Exploring Ancient World Cultures</a>: Excellent treatment of many ancient cultures, including the Greek. Check out the "Conclusions" section for some astute observations about how we view different cultures today.</p> <p><a href="#">Greek Mythology</a>: Don't miss <a href="#">Heroes of Greek Mythology</a> (cartoon versions of the myths based on ancient texts).</p> <p><a href="#">The Glory That Was Greece</a>: Discussion of Greek drama</p> <p><a href="#">Early Greek Philosophy</a>: Thumbnail sketches of Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers from Thales to Democritus.</p> <p><a href="#">Major Figures in Western Philosophy</a>: Nice overview of important figures in the history of philosophy. Be sure to check out <a href="#">Socrates</a>, <a href="#">Plato</a>, and <a href="#">Aristotle</a>.</p> <p>Three <a href="#">Excerpts from Socrates: Philosophy's Martyr</a>: Note especially “The Trial” and “Socrates versus Plato.”</p> <p><a href="#">Confucius and Socrates Compared</a>: An interesting comparison of their life and work.</p> <p><a href="#">Plato and His Dialogues</a>: Includes Plato's autobiography and major aspects of his philosophy.</p>
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<p><b>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:</b></p>	<p><a href="#">Plato's Epistemology in a Nutshell</a>: Discusses Plato's theory of how we acquire knowledge. Be sure to look at the charts. See also Plato's <a href="#">Analogy of the Divided Line</a>.</p> <p><a href="#">Greek Philosophy: Aristotle</a>: An overview of Aristotle's philosophy focusing on his classification of knowledge, including the four causes and the doctrine of the mean.</p> <p><a href="#">The Universe of Aristotle and Ptolemy</a>: Describes the earth-centered universe people accepted until Copernicus and Galileo proved the ancients wrong.</p> <p>Drawing on the resources you have had an opportunity to explore (textbook, course documents, online resources, library resources), answer one or more of the following questions:</p> <p><b>How did the works of early Greek poets, dramatists, and historians contribute to later Greek philosophy and humanism?</b></p> <p><b>How did Greek philosophy break with the myth-making habit of Near Eastern thought?</b></p> <p><b>Who were the Materialists? What did they try to accomplish? What early scientific concepts emerged from their thought?</b></p> <p><b>What did Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle contribute to Greek philosophy? What did Greek philosophy pass on to later philosophical and religious thought?</b></p> <p><b>How are Plato's <i>Allegory of the Cave</i> and Aristotle's <i>Nichomachean Ethics</i> still relevant today?</b></p> <p><b>What special insights have you gained from your study of Greek Culture?</b></p>
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