

Cradle of Western Civilization

by Sophie Dulesh

I. The Beginning

What is a moral value? Among other things, it is the binary creed defining moral right versus wrong as rationalized by humans for humans. Some philosophical doctrines assert that humanity will inevitably continue to make moral progress forever, an idea that is accepted rather intuitively but eagerly.

The earliest verbal expressions of those values must have been ancient myth-based polytheistic religious and naturalistic beliefs that originated during the time of the Cognitive Revolution some 70,000 years ago. At the time, the development of language and the associated abstract fictional thinking, both features unique for *Homo Sapiens*, allowed for the unprecedented spread of shared collective imagining and beliefs (“imagined orders”), which in turn advanced much needed mutual understanding, trust and cooperation, working like a social glue among the tribes. “Imagined orders are not evil conspiracies or useless mirages. Rather, they are the only way large numbers of humans can cooperate effectively” (1).

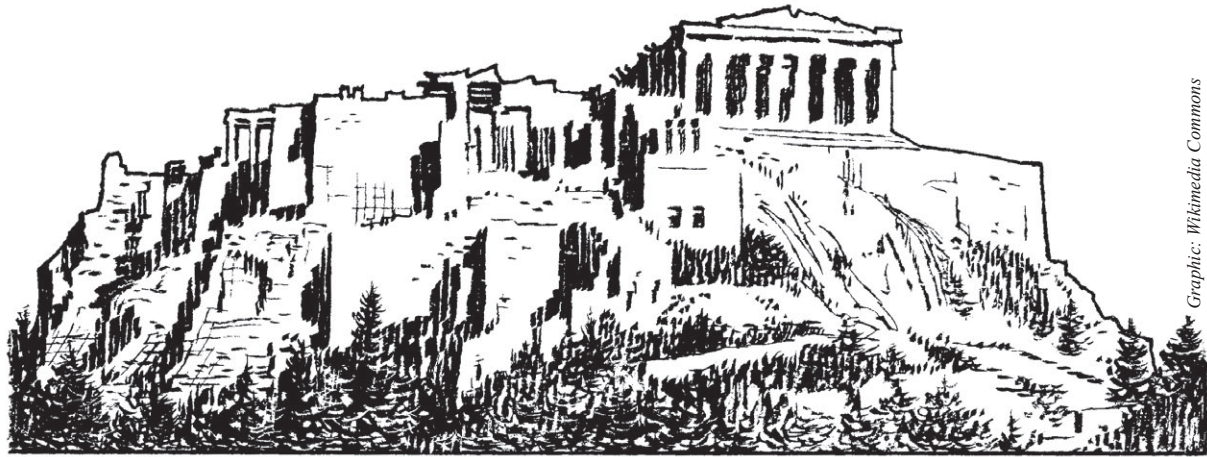
Most of world religions emerged over 60,000 years later, during the Axial Age (a term coined by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers for the 8th to 3rd centuries BCE), the time of patriarchy. These religions were versions of shamanic polytheistic paganism, and included idol-

worship and the blood sacrifice of humans, later replaced by animals.

Zoroastrianism with its peculiar mix of cosmic dualism (an eternal struggle of evil versus good) and early monotheism, encompassing messianic ideas and concepts of heaven, hell and free will, had been widespread in the Orient from the 5th century BCE until the 7th century CE, perpetuated in Persia by the Sassanid dynasty up until the rise of Islam. Zoroastrianism influenced Mediterranean civilizations (particularly the Gnostics) and later also all three major monotheistic religions; today only the Yazidis still loosely follow it.

In Greece during the 6th century BCE, the cult of Dionysus-Bacchus was largely replaced by the Orphic cult, whose adherents’ “physical intoxication [was] superseded by mental intoxication... Orphism was the first universal [rather than tribal] religion” (2). Many of its practices, both spiritual and ritualistic, were taken over by Christianity (such as the fundamental Orphic symbolic swallowing of the slain god, which became the bread and wine of the Eucharist symbolizing the body and blood of Jesus). In the New Testament, human blood sacrifice was abandoned but retained for Jesus. The Judeo-Christian religion was fundamental in shaping Western ethical views.

However, religion was not the only root of moral values, nor was it the earliest or most instrumental; innate human decency and compassion served as their natural foundation.



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Sketch of the Acropolis at Athens

Philosophy and science provided a directing rail and served as the creative force advancing them.

Throughout human history many societies have risen and fallen, having achieved remarkable progress in agriculture and construction technology, in astronomy and navigation, in medicine, poetry and the arts, in meditation and craving for personal integrity. Writing was invented independently in at least two places: in Mesopotamia (Sumer) around 3200 BCE and in Meso-America around 600 BCE. By the end of the pre-dynastic times (around 3100 BCE), the Egyptians had hieroglyphs for numbers, namely for 1, 10, 100, 1000, 10000, 100000 and 1000000. To refer to 8 they used the hieroglyph 1 eight times; for 12 – the hieroglyph for 10 once and for 1 twice, and so on. The same principle is partly preserved in Roman numerals. The Egyptians calculated 'pi' and formulated what we now call the Pythagorean theorem in the second millennium BCE, that is 1400 years before Pythagoras. The mythology of the ancient Egyptians, their creation of centralized governance, development of papyrus,

advances in architecture and astronomy, as well as their Carthaginian achievements in navigation and commerce, are astounding.

The Sumerian civilization (in Ur and Nineveh) had attained advanced construction capability (ziggurats of mud bricks) by 2300 BCE and created the Epic of Gilgamesh, regarded as the oldest written literary work, around 2000 BCE. By 3000 BCE, they had invented the first-ever equivalent of money for trade and the exchange of goods. This was a giant step forward, advancing mutual inter-tribal mobility, trust and cooperation. Their currency was initially a measure of barley; by 2500 BCE, it was already a piece of silver (shekel). Money such as mol-

lusk cowrie shells, ivory beads, and salt, were used from about 2000 BCE in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. These shells were still in use for paying taxes in Uganda in the early 20th century.

The early to middle part of our era was a time of intellectual blossoming in India. Aryabhata (476-550) explained celestial eclipses by heliocentric principles, introduced the concept of zero, and calculated the circumference of Earth. This was also the time of the Abbasid Golden Age

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(750-1258). Under Harun al-Rashid (786-809) in Baghdad, the famous House of Wisdom was created, and the study of philosophy, mathematics and medicine blossomed. Arabs also adopted the decimal system from India. Hellenistic, Indian and Chinese documents translated into Arabic were incorporated by Islamic culture and the works of Plato, Aristotle and others were thus rescued for the future.

The sophistication of the Aztec culture (13th-16th CE) and of the kingdoms of southeast Asia (5th-14th centuries CE) also comes to mind, as does that of China, where barley beer was known as early as 3400 BCE; the harness for plow animals and drilled oil wells were used before 500 CE; silk, paper, and gun powder were discovered; and the compass to aid navigation was used after 1300 CE. All of these achievements constitute the breathtaking background tapestry of human intellectual progress.

And what about moral values? Two historical peaks of moral progress can arguably be discerned in the West. One major upswing occurred in the ancient Mediterranean civilizations, mostly pre-Christian Greece and Rome, while the other, in our era, is grounded in the European Renaissance and Protestant Reformation. (By “Protestant Reformation,” I don’t mean a theology of Protestantism, but rather the changes in mentality, such as in the life goals, self-reliance, and the work ethic, that were critical in the creation of the Western middle class.)

II. Ancient Greece and Rome: first humanists. Golden age in Greece (5th-4th centuries BCE): open society and soaring scientific advances

The roots of Greek Enlightenment and humanism were laid in Ionia in the sixth century BCE. It was the remarkable century, including the lifetimes of Confucius and Buddha and the first turn to monotheism, in the Judaism of Babylonian captivity. Athens’ bequest of democracy began in the 6th century BCE, when the Romans expelled their kings.

Intellectual and social achievements peaked during the time of Pericles (495-429 BCE) and

continued into the Hellenistic Age close to our era (323-31 BCE). Materialists Heraclitus, Pythagoras and Xenophanes were followed by atomists like Leucippus (5th century BCE) and his disciple Democritus (5th – 4th century BCE), and by secular humanist Epicurus (4th – 3rd century BCE), then by Euclid (born circa 300 BCE) and Archimedes (287-211 BCE). Democritus named two of the properties of atoms, shape and size, while Epicurus added weight; he is also remembered for the statement, “Why should I fear death? If I am, death is not. If death is, I am not.”

In Rome of the first century BCE, there was an explosion of early humanist thought: Lucretius Carus, the Epicurean (ca. 99 – 55 BCE; his secular poem *De Rerum Natura* was rediscovered in 1417), Cicero (106 – 43 BCE), Virgil (70 – 19 BCE), Horace (65 – 8 BCE), Ovid (43 – 1 BCE), Catullus (84 – 54 BCE), Julius Caesar (100 – 44 BCE) and others, whose works have been quoted up to our times, that is for two millennia.

While the “nature versus nurture” topic is outside the scope of this article, I’m taking the liberty of briefly referring to the known if enigmatic phenomenon of the clustering of talents at certain times and locations. This seems to support the “nurture” idea: if potential geniuses are expected to be randomly distributed in populations, it must be something in the environment that advances their full realization at a given time and place so much more than elsewhere. In ancient Greece it happened in the 5th – 3rd centuries BCE, in Italy in the 14th – 18th centuries, in Russia in the 18th – 19th centuries, among other examples.

In ancient Greece and Rome, beliefs ranged from the polytheistic to coming within sight of non-belief; “the range of deities worshiped... was proudly elastic” (3). By the Hellenistic age, the traditional belief in Hades for the deceased had receded judging from the preserved tombstones. At the time, some people in Greece even totally rejected the idea of an afterlife, while others referred vaguely to the “Kosmos.”

The humanist and dialectic Heraclitus (535-475 BCE) ridiculed the religiously sanctified

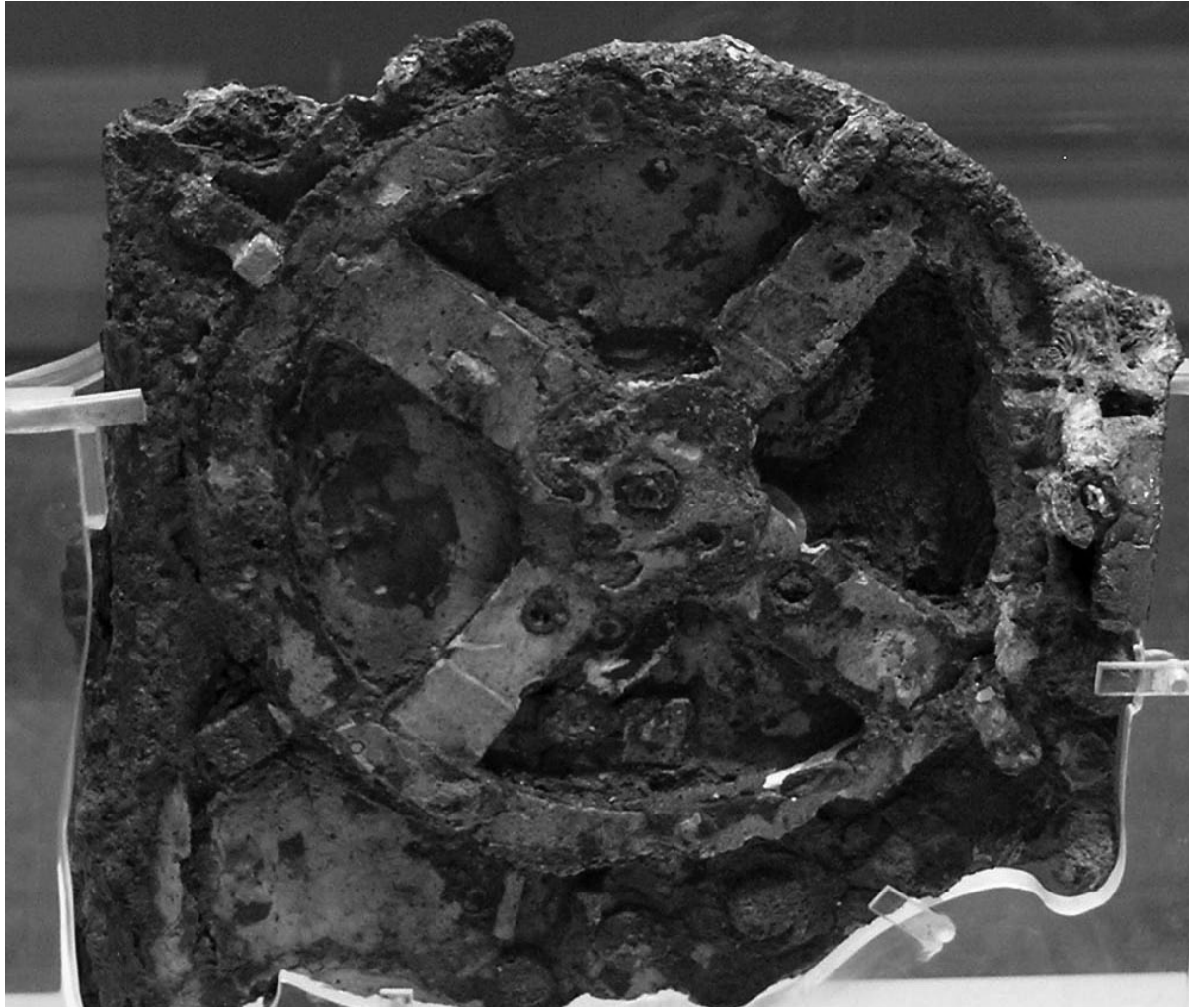


Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The Antikythera mechanism is an ancient mechanical (analog) computer and orrery, used to predict astronomical positions and eclipses for calendrical and astrological purpose.

custom of the blood vendetta (“Like washing off dirt by bathing in mud”) and famously declared: “All is Change. No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man.”

Pythagoras (born in 571 BCE) and his followers advanced the use of numbers and patterns as the basis of natural sciences, connected them to musical harmony and developed the concept of irrational numbers (such as the square-root of two) among many other brilliant insights. Remarkably, women were accepted in the Pythagorean Brotherhood and given equal rights. Many Pythagorean ideas entered Platonism and through it defined much in the mainstream of later Western thought.

Xenophanes (late 6th – 5th century BCE) fought against pseudo-science and was, perhaps, the first to spell out the relativity of a belief: “If a horse or an ox could paint a picture, their gods would look like a horse or an ox.” Sixteen centuries later, Al-Ma’arri (973-1057), the Arab poet-rationalist, agreed, asserting that the “true believers” in mosques and cloisters merely blindly follow the local habits: “Had they been born among Magians or Sabians, they would have become Magians or Sabians.”

This echoes a Hawaiian joke of our time, some twenty-seven centuries later: The white man argues that God is white, the black man – that He is black, while the Hawaiian suggests, “Let’s ask Him.” He phones and they all

hear the God's response, "Aloha, God is listening!" It's a Hawaiian joke, mind you.

The idea of the relativity of beliefs has much more profound ramifications than might superficially seem to be the case. The understanding that our views and interpretations are defined by locality (time, place and environment) and that there is no one unchangeable eternal Truth (God's Word) defines the critical Western values of humanism, pluralism, tolerance, mutual respect, skepticism and the right to be different yet accepted.

Anti-dialectic dogmatism and intolerant conformism are based on the opposite idea, one of a forever invariable Truth. The latter is the foundation of fundamentalist fanatical radical religions. It was this idea of immutable Truth that won the day in medieval Islam when *ijtihad* (independent reasoning, acknowledging the right to and need for "here-and-now" interpretations of the Quran and Sunnah) was gradually banned starting in the 10th century. In the Sunni theology, every word of the Quran is the true final and binding word of Allah (the concept of "abrogation" in the case of contradictory verses in the Quran notwithstanding) – an anti-dialectic one-size-fit-all-at-all-times immutable celestial perfectionism in diametric opposition to the very idea of any change/progress.

Aristotle's worldview was teleological in that he thought that all the processes are directed toward a Goal and have a Cause (a 'mover,' that is God), a popular and pleasing concept, later propagated among others by Thomas Aquinas. Aristotle and Plato adhered to a cyclical understanding of time flow that was based on seasonal changes and had prevailed since time immemorial, so the idea of linear progress

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could not have been entertained. (In the words of a Sumerian proverb of the early 2nd millennium BCE: "The life of yesterday is repeated today.")

Unlike Heraclitus, Plato rejected change; both he and Aristotle denied evolution and progress in favor of immovable eternal perfection. For Plato, the world was designed by a divine craftsman with own world as a model; hence both the creative power and its values are external to our world, and our reality is just a pale replica (a shadow on the cave wall) of the eternal order of Ideas. For materialist Aristotle, whose

ideal lay in moderation (the golden mean), the goal and values are both intrinsic to our world. He believed that the cycle of regimes was embedded in a larger natural cycle, whereby cataclysms like floods would periodically eliminate all memory of past cycles.

In mathematics and astronomy, the ancient Greeks soared to a level not to be reached again until the 16th century. In cosmology, a Pythagorean pupil, Philolaus (470 – 385 BCE), was the first to break with the geocentric worldview, while Herakleides (387– 312 BCE) and Aristarchus (310 – 230 BCE) were the first to assert a heliocentric world view, later forgotten and independently rediscovered by Copernicus seventeen centuries later.

Seven hundred years ago a monk pulled a random ancient parchment off the shelf of his convent library in order to write his prayers over its pages. Unfortunately, it was a manuscript by Archimedes, and two of its texts had never been preserved as copies. One of them, titled *The Method*, laid out the basics of calculus nearly two thousand years before Newton (1643 – 1727) and Leibniz (1646 – 1716). "The researchers have [also] discovered that

Archimedes had a more sophisticated understanding of the concept of infinity than anyone had realized...It was a new twist on the entire trajectory of Western mathematics” (4).

“In the 6th century BCE, educated men knew that the earth was a sphere; in the 6th century CE, they again thought it was a disc... Not until the end of the 9th century CE was the spherical shape of the earth, and the possible existence of the antipodes, reinstated, fifteen hundred years after Pythagoras... Thus, by the 11th century CE, a view of the universe had been achieved roughly corresponding to that of the 5th century BCE. It had taken the Greeks some two hundred fifty years to progress from Pythagoras... to heliocentric system; it took Europe [shrouded in Christianity] more than twice that time” (2).

Galen (129 – 216), the Roman surgeon, performed brain and eye operations that were not attempted afterward for almost two millennia.

III. Moral values: democracy, liberty, social equality of opportunity; concepts of self-perception; of slavery and misogyny; of justice and afterlife; of shame and honour versus guilt, repentance and forgiveness

Ethical and social progress in ancient Greece was also astounding: “Despite lack of political freedom, the society by the 3rd century BCE was in many ways the nearest approach to an ‘open’ society... and nearer than any that would be seen again until very modern times... The liberation of the individual from the bonds of clan and family was one of the major achievements of Greek rationalism, and one for which the credit must go to the Athenian democracy”

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(5) even if their distinctly populist style (after all, it was the Athenian public who condemned Socrates to death) already had its critics at the time. Plato, for one, rejected it in favor of the autocracy of his top intellectual guardians who, by virtue of being philosophers, should become kings; perhaps a root of the contemporary meritocracy

i) Democracy, liberty, equality in pursuit of happiness

Sparta, like Rome, elected its governments, but only men, citizens and property-owners had the

right to vote. Athens, Aristotle believed, was a true democracy because it had no property restrictions (but non-citizens, women and slaves were excluded) which assured, he thought, equality as well as providing practical political education for citizens and leading to a more representative form of self-government.

Athenians came to prize the classical virtues which they were first to define and which would be mostly inherited by Western civilization: order, balance and control. Tolerance ruled: five of the six leading philosophers of the time, including Aristotle, were foreign-born, yet they then dominated the intellectual life of Athens.

Furthermore and notably, “...in the Greek world... the idea of human excellence was freed... from determination by social position [determined by merit, not noble origin]... A central feature of modern liberal conceptions of social justice can indeed be expressed by saying that they altogether deny the necessity of social identities... It is a distinctly modern achievement to have even set this problem” (5). And a profoundly humanistic one, we can add.

Significantly, “Democratia was rooted politically and linguistically in the Greek world



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Roman Colosseum

[since the 6th century BCE]. Republican Rome bequeathed the equally important idea of liberty...Romans fought for, and about, liberty, not democracy... The end of monarchy was also the birth of liberty and of the free Roman Republic. For the rest of Roman history, *rex*, or 'king,' was a term of loathing in Roman politics... By 367 BCE... a governing class defined by birth [was replaced] with one defined by wealth and achievement" (3). Julius Caesar, when officially made 'dictator for life,' was assassinated within weeks in the name of liberty.

Two remarkable political figures, the brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchi stand out for their humanistic attempts to distribute land and grain to the Roman poor; it cost them both their life (they were murdered in 133 and 121 BCE). The noble Roman tradition of providing staple food for the poor at state expense originated with Gaius Gracchus and long remained exceptional, if not unique.

Most scholars now consider the collapse of the Western Roman Empire to be part of a larger process of transformation, not a decline and fall: Rome had become peripheral to the empire it created, whose center of political and economic

life shifted to Constantinople over the course of the 4th century CE (6).

ii) Concepts of slavery and misogyny

The concepts of slavery dramatically differed in ancient Athens versus Rome. "For many Roman slaves it was not necessarily a life sentence. They were regularly given their freedom and if their owner was a Roman citizen, then they also gained full Roman citizenship, with almost no disadvantages as against those who were freeborn. The contrast with classical Athens is striking Outsiders saw it as a powerful factor in Rome's success... By the second century CE, the majority of the free-citizen population...of Rome had slaves somewhere in their ancestry" (3).

For that matter, anti-black racism was also unknown in ancient Rome and the upward social mobility of African non-slaves in Rome was unimpeded unlike in the US or Britain until very recently. Lucius Septimius Bassianus, known as Caracalla, was a black Roman emperor who ruled from 211 to 217. Caracalla was the eldest son of Septimius Severus, the

first black Libyan-born Roman general, then emperor, who ruled in Britain. In Sparta, in sharp contrast, the tradition of allowing citizens to kill Helots (slaves) without retribution during certain days each year was preserved.

Slavery was widely accepted as the principal productive force, but its controversial ethical facet did not go unnoticed in Athens, even if few took the risk of denouncing it. Aristotle tried to justify it by condemning coercion. But he believed that “reason” was the privilege of the few, the masses were not fit to possess it and that too much freedom given to too many people would lead to discord and fighting.

His highest ideal of a fair social contract was a society where no citizens would need to do any hard dirty work, which would be provided by non-citizens and slaves.

Plato thought that mortal man was prevented from hearing the purifying Harmony of the Spheres by the grossness of his bodily senses. It is of interest that, in the Eastern tradition, Buddha was likewise unable to create fair and just laws for His people on Earth, unless He could hear the Heavenly Music: when Buddha’s ears became blocked with dirty swearing multiplying on Earth like worms, His fair rule failed and wars, floods and epidemics followed. Christian Platonists (following the Neoplatonists like Plotinus, 204 – 270) also adopted this point: the first man lost the faculty of hearing Heavenly Music following his Fall.

The Christian Church from its inception sanctified slavery. Paul wrote in his Epistle to Philemon, “Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called.” Jesus preached, “Obey your earthly masters with deep respect and fear” (Ephesians 6:50). It took millennia for slavery

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to be outlawed legally. The last country in the world to legally abolish slavery was Mauritania, which did so in 1981, although de facto slavery continues to exist.

In the Middle Ages, the Christian clergy became successors to the philosophers of antiquity. “The mystic union between Platonism and Christianity was consummated [by the] dark and oppressive Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), as the bridge between the vanished ancient, and the emerging new civilization...Augustine came perilously near to plucking out of the human heart that sinful desire for knowledge” (2).

And what about misogyny? In Greece it was believed

that when a man leads a life of injustice, he is reborn as a woman in his next reincarnation. Even though gender inequality was considered ‘natural’ in that patriarchal society, protests against the unfair treatment of women were not unknown. Aristotle offered in his Politics: “There was by nature a position to be filled, and there were people who by nature occupied it,” hence having substituted the naturally necessary dualism of sexual identity with an arbitrarily justified social one. Trying to prove that being a slave was another necessary social identity, Aristotle pointed out that with a good master, slaves would attain the same position that was in reality occupied by women: “A slave does not have the deliberative faculty at all, while a woman has it, but lacks authority” (5).

“Roman women... had much greater independence than women in most parts of the classical Greek or Near Eastern world... A [Roman] woman did not take her husband’s name or fall entirely under his legal authority. After the death of her father, an adult woman could own property... buy and sell, inherit or make a will and

free slaves – many of the rights that women in Britain did not gain till the 1870s” (3).

Church fathers in their fierce sexual asceticism (Origen was known to have castrated himself in his religious zeal) rooted and immortalized misogyny in Christendom; as a result, misogyny, like anti-Semitism and racism, the other hateful creations of the Christian Fathers, remains an unresolved universal injustice even now, twenty centuries later.

iii) *Moral self-perception and concepts of justice and afterlife*

Homer’s *heroes* (11th – 9th centuries BCE) traditionally attributed all the wrongs of their own behavior (antisocial, erratic, destructive, nonsensical) to having been possessed by irrational supernatural forces (gods and daemons) with no attempts to account for their own possible failures. Later, rudimentary concepts of justice came into societal focus; the ancient Greeks began to moralize that Zeus should have punished the offenders and were understandably bitter about having observed a lack of any such punishment. To provide some semblance of justice, two concepts emerged: a deferred punishment for the offender in his own afterlife (voiced since the Archaic age, sometime between 800 –480 BCE) and the later idea of inherited guilt and punishment (“...Upon your children and the children of your children”). In Homer, no beliefs in inherited guilt can be found, while punishments in the afterlife are mentioned in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Later, wrongdoing (injustice) and ‘miasma’ (or pollution) were more and more perceived as contagious, irrational (being possessed by

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external evil) and carried over as hereditary (descendants were held responsible).

By the end of the Archaic age, the substitution of magical explanations with moral accountability was gaining steam: the idea of ‘pollution’ was gradually replaced with the one of ‘sin’ (as a wrongful act resulting from one’s self-indulgence), but only after the importance of motive emerged in the Attic secular law by

the end of the 5th century BCE.

What before had been considered to be natural functions of the body was superseded with an occult divine entity, the soul. Those anti-humanistic ideas were later eagerly adopted by Christianity. Even the notorious Christian sexual asceticism might be traced to ancient Greece as there is some evidence that Empedocles (495 –435 BCE), for instance, totally and angrily denounced sex and marriage.

Magical purification from pollution could be obtained through elaborate ritual catharsis; those rituals must have been used as well to provide a measure of psychological social hygiene for the masses. “Purity, rather than justice, has then become the cardinal means to salvation” (7).

Plato, a student of Socrates, rejected the ‘justice’ of divine punishment of the sinner’s descendants. He asserted that human behavior is governed by enlightened self-interest (this idea was resurrected during the Renaissance in the form of the “rational actor”) and that virtue is just a technique of leading a rational life.

iv) *Shame-and-honour versus guilt-and-forgiveness*

Ancient Greece was a ‘shame-and-honour’ culture (where honour was the highest value) as opposed to a ‘guilt’ culture (where it is right-

eousness). Shame is a social phenomenon: not a fear of God but primarily a fear of public opinion determines one's behavior; it is a control mechanism that a society uses against its harmful self-assertive alpha males. Once implanted (very early in life, before the faculty of reason arises) the shaming code becomes impervious to reason in tradition-dominated societies, where nobody is allowed to think independently.

Guilt, on the other hand, is rooted in the concept of morality in the Judeo-Christian creed. "In shame cultures when a person does wrong he or she is stained. In guilt cultures what is wrong is not the doer but the deed, not the sinner but the sin. The person retains one's fundamental worth... It is the act that has somehow to be put right. That is why in guilt cultures there are processes of repentance,

atonement and forgiveness" (8). Guilt and repentance established the possibility that we are not condemned endlessly to live with or to repeat wrongdoing, as the atonement and subsequent forgiveness are the way to overcome it and progress; once again, the future is not an inevitable cyclical repetition of the past. Forgiveness liberates us from that past, breaks the irreversibility of offense and revenge. The transition from a shame to a guilt culture was a major leap forward.

The next crucial step would be the secularization of the idea of forgiveness that followed much later: "[in Christianity] only God can absolve the sin... It would take a new conception of the self, predicated on a secularized sense of the possibility of conversion, before the modern conception of human forgiveness would come into being" (9).

An ideal society as conceived by Renaissance humanist Thomas More in his book Utopia



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

**IV. Summary:
ancient
enlightenment and
recoil; the decline of
Greek rationalism
(from the 3rd
century BCE) and
the dissolution of
classical culture
(300 – 600).**

There was a peculiar residual ‘after-wave’ of cultural upswing in the 2nd century CE (138 – 192; extended by some historians to 69 – 235) in the world of late antiquity, at the time experiencing a revival of economic and political life and of the Greek Sophists (the influential experts in rhetoric who traveled the Greek-speaking world giving their instruction – unlike Socrates – for a fee). It was called the Age of Antonines, of ‘the five good emperors’ (from Nerva to Marcus Aurelius). Ephesus and Smyrna were built at that time. Manuscripts in medicine, astronomy, science – the source of knowledge for all, the Latins, Byzantines, and Arabs, for the next fifteen hundred years – were written during the Age of Antonines.

However as early as in the 5th century BCE, there appeared some symptoms of a recoil, backpedaling from an earlier spectacular Enlightenment. Previously unheard of things were happening in Athens: about 432 BCE, astronomy or the denial of supernatural forces were made legally punishable; heresy trials were taking place; at least five leading philosophers were exiled, and Socrates was made to drink the hemlock. As far as we know, however, Athens was unique in this; nowhere else was this trend recorded.

“To understand the reasons for this long-drawn-out decline is one of the major problems of world history... [In 3rd century BCE Greece] growing demand for occultism and astrology [was apparent]... Seneca quoted with approval the view that we should not trouble

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to investigate things that it is neither possible nor useful to know, such as the cause of tides or the principle of perspective... [This is] the intellectual climate of the Middle Ages... it made the triumph [of Christianity] possible; but it was not created by Christians. What, then, did create it?” (2).

Some blame political deterioration, loss of freedom, and economic decline related to the exhausting wars of the time, and to the deadly epidemics that killed nearly 100,000 in Athens in 430 BCE – hardships traditionally connected to mass hysteria and increased searching for protection in religion. But the next two centuries in ancient Greece, though unusually peaceful, still failed to bring any reversal of the decline. Others point out that ancient Greek science lacked the experimental method and was deductive, or argue that the cause is to be sought in slavery, a source of cheap labor, inhibiting any incentive for the development of technology. All these arguments are equally unconvincing.

There were other hypothetical attempts to explain the recoil: Dodds (5) suggested that self-liberation from irrational fears, from imagined punishments, brought about by rationalism, could be misinterpreted by the uneducated masses as the freedom for unlimited self-assertion, as rights without duties, ever unwelcome but particularly during wartime. This might help to explain not only the recoil from rationalism in ancient Greece but also the drawback from the Western Enlightenment that has been ongoing since the 20th century. And there seems to be continued backpedaling right now, in the early 21st century. Brexit, the rise of Le Pen in France and of course of Trump in the US come to mind, as does the global resurgence of radical Islam. Some

would argue, however, that the first three constitute a rebellion by the people against their elites, who refuse to recognize the threat that Islam poses and are in fact allowing the Islamization of their societies to the detriment of their people.

Sacks submitted, “A journey down the road to moral relativism and individualism... no society in history has survived for long. It was the road taken in Greece in the third pre-Christian century and Rome in the first century CE: two great civilizations that shortly thereafter declined and died” (10).

Greece in the 5th – 4th centuries BCE and the West in the 16th–19th centuries both closely approached ‘the rule of critical reason’ leading to a secular and humanistic liberal democracy. Both failed. In post-Renaissance Europe, the rise and spread of rationalism, humanism and secularization, the essence of Western values, was halted by the beginning of the 20th century and reverted into decline and decadence, as if repeating the history of ancient Greece. And this time it happened despite the relentless upswing of intellectual progress; it is uniquely our moral achievements that have been stunted since the 20th century.

I dare to suggest (and it could fit at least the later recoil) that since the 20th century, technical progress together with the information revolution led to the previously unimaginable mass influx of newcomers from all walks of life to the global scene, which suddenly became accessible to billions of people with at best only the rudiments of literacy. This influx could be expected to inevitably if temporarily ‘dilute,’ hence lower, all the previously achieved Western standards, of which the moral and ethical ones would understandably be more difficult to internalize than intellectual, technological or artistic ones. Could something like that mass influx have happened (on a proportional scale) in the ancient world as well and also as a result of their spectacular Golden Age characterized by the explosion of intellectual and moral advances – thereby unintentionally contributing to bringing its top achievements down? Today there seems no an-

swer to this question, but neither are there any immediately evident causal obstacles to this interpretation.

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Acknowledgment: The support of my friend Alan Danesh was much appreciated.

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