

Introduction

"this inquiry" = scientific inquiry = inquiry into the workings of nature.

invisible
material
stuff in
process
underly
that
which is
visible.

Greek philosophy was born out of the struggle to understand nature, for understanding nature proved to be less simple and straightforward than the earliest Greek scientist had confidently assumed. Scientific inquiry became philosophical when men discovered that it was necessary to ask questions about this inquiry itself and about its method. The first scientists had taken for granted that underlying the visible changes in nature there is a material stuff in process. The problem, they conceived, was simply to ascertain the nature of this material (Is it water or air or fire?) and the changes it undergoes (evaporation, silting-up, and so on). It gradually became clear, however, that the assumptions on which this procedure rested were ambiguous. What does it mean to say that something endures through change? What is the relation between the one real stuff and its many appearances? Since the various answers suggested by the earliest philosophers contradicted one another, there came to be a widespread scepticism about

the power of reason as an instrument for obtaining knowledge. And if one could not trust reason, what *could* one trust? (Chapter 1.)

Meanwhile a parallel development was occurring in Greek thought about conduct. A new type of man had emerged from the changed economic and social conditions that had overthrown the old feudal nobility. The new-rich repudiated the old chivalric ideal of honor and loyalty, and "passion" became a justification for every excess. Natural science had its repercussions on this situation. In a world conceived to be a purely natural process, what place was there for man as a moral being? (Chapter 2.)

All these currents of thought and feeling came to a focus during the prolonged world war that took place in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C., and as a result of the political and economic dislocations that this exhausting struggle brought in its train. Zeus had been dethroned and whirlwind was king.

The central philosophical question, accordingly, was how to rehabilitate the old belief in the existence of an objective moral order and of a public truth cognizable by reason. To do this it was necessary to resolve those paradoxes about change, about the one and the many, and about appearance and reality that had led to the Sophists' scepticism. Two major solutions were worked out, each of which was to be a recurring influence on subsequent thought. One of these solutions was Atomism, according to which the universe is a purposeless congeries of small material particles differing only quantitatively. (Chapter 3.) The other was the theory of forms. As Plato conceived them, forms are supersensible entities whose relation to the particulars of sense experience is incapable of clear formulation. (Chapters 4 and 5.) Aristotle sought to avoid this difficulty by introducing the concept of individual substance, which he held to be an amalgam of form and matter, of achievement and possibility. (Chapter 6.) Despite great differences in emphasis, both versions of the theory held the universe to be a purposive system, not a merely mechanical process. (Chapter 7.)

All these philosophers also sought to find a more rational basis for conduct than the religious myths that had once, but now no longer, provided a sanction for socially oriented behavior. And despite differences of detail, they agreed that this rationale is long-range happiness, which is attainable, they held, in an active life of personal culture and of public achievement, but which is limited to a relatively small elite who have the capacity for such activities and the leisure to pursue them. Unfortunately, in the time of troubles following the dissolution of Alexander's abortive empire, men began to abandon hope and to fall back on negative ideals of apathy and passivity. (Chapter 8.) Though the emergence of the Roman imperium for a time halted the collapse of classical culture and enabled the Stoics to develop a social theory that wove together strands from both the old and the new points of view, it too met with disaster. As the barbarians disrupted the ordered life of the West, the old classical poise and self-assurance vanished and men came more and more to lean on a greater-than-man.

But though the Greek belief in self-sufficiency thus disappeared for centuries, it proved astonishingly resilient. It was revived about five centuries ago, and

even in the complex, interdependent world of today, it remains an ideal. And, though our modern world is more concerned with itself than on knowledge as a goal, the quest for knowledge of the universe is essentially self-sufficient.

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There is none

even in the complex, interdependent societies of the twentieth century it remains an ideal. And, though our modern emphasis is less on contemplation as an end in itself than on knowledge as an instrument for changing the world, our notion of the universe is essentially secular and natural like that of the Greeks.

When people mention our heritage from Greece and Rome they may mean anything from the Apollo Belvedere and the Corinthian capital to natural law. But at the core of this rich and complex heritage are the ideas of nature as a process capable of being understood by man and of man as an autonomous and self-sufficient part of this natural order.