

Example of essay on the adaptability of virtue ancient greece and the setting of ...

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



The evolution of moral values follows the arc of ancient Greek society, from its martial antecedents in the Homeric age through the blossoming of high culture that immortalized the Athenians to the subjective meditations of the Stoics. The series of armed conflicts that archaeologists have identified as the Trojan War (circa 1200 B. C.) were manifestations of ancient Mycenaean culture, an Indo-European civilization characterized by warfare and the virtues of physical courage. From this heroic past came the concepts of arete, or “ excellence,” and agathos, roughly translated as “ good.” A close reading of Homer reveals that “ agathos is used to commend the most admired type of man, and the noun arete to commend his most admired qualities” (Cavalier, Gouinlock and Sterba, 1990). Socrates, Plato and Aristotle reinvented the meaning of morality, orienting it within the context of the state, an ideal to which each member of the community should aspire for the greater good of the community. Thus, the Western concept of civic morality that has been handed down was defined by the development of ancient Greek society. In Plato’s philosophical dialogue Crito, he teaches that in a crisis, every man “ reverts to traditional values: any ‘ goodman’ should help his friends when their well-being is threatened and hazard his life if need be” (Cavalier, et al, 1990).

According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “ the views of moral character held by Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics are the starting point for most other

philosophical discussions of character” (2003). Yet the concept of virtue is considerably older, though its meaning changed considerably over time.

Moral value for the likes of Bronze Age warriors meant the virtue of the battlefield, and personal excellence, or *arête*, had to do with the individual's ability to stay alive and achieve victory over his enemies. In this brutal reality, individuals who thrived did so largely through the commission of violence and, in this sense, were identified as "good," in that they were more successful than the enemies they vanquished in combat..

And yet as values changed, "competitive excellence," the noble ethos of Achilles, gave way to the civilizing influence of the Athenian golden age. As the needs of society changed, Greek values changed (1970). Thus, "the social structure of ancient Greece (became) inimical to the development of an adequate concept of moral responsibility" (Long, 1970). With the rise of the polis, the Greek city-state, the old virtues of personal courage, conquest and acquisition were rendered obsolete. The polis existed according to the social compact in which individuals had responsibilities as well as rights. In *Individual and Community: The Rise of the Polis, 800 – 500 B. C.*, Chester Starr writes that this was the first time in human history that a civilization was able to survive under such circumstances, and represented a remarkable triumph of communal cooperation over the self-aggrandizing doctrine which asserted that the strong ruled by virtue of strength alone. And yet this was more than just a philosophical paradigm shift: as people came together in a collective enterprise of survival, self-serving individualism became an archaic and anti-social way of life by the time Athenian civilization reached its pinnacle. The Spartans and Athenians may have invoked the warrior ethos during the Peloponnesian War, but it was the

need to work together, to act in the common interest that drove the evolution of moral values.

It was Aristotle who asserted that the state “ aims at being, as far as it can be, a society composed of equals and peers” which seeks to “ secure a system of good laws well obeyed” (Starr, 46). Aristotle also classified man as a social animal destined to live among other humans in a polis, but the idea of moral virtue that drove him to communal living was a slow, gradual process that was part and parcel of the Greek epoch. Despite Aristotle’s (and, to a lesser degree, Plato’s) protestations to the contrary, the poleis were not manifestations of a civic utopia, which became clear during the ruinous war between Athens and Sparta. “ The war revealed the main defect of the polis as a political unit: its exclusiveness and narrow self-interests” (Richards, 2001). The city-states may have conferred social order but the chaos and violence that characterized the idea of morality during the Mycenaean era was still very much in evidence between poleis, reinforcing the proposition that virtue was not just an intrinsic social trait but the produce of social experimentation.

The development, or perhaps formalization, of the concept of personal morality was another subject of abiding interest to the ancient Greeks. Adopting a broad perspective, Plato and his successors were concerned with the individual’s virtuous personal development, which they saw as an important element in the moral integrity of the state. In the Symposium, Plato contends that the love of wisdom is love in its most elevated form, a credo aimed at fostering an enlightened community and avoiding the degrading physical, animal condition in which pre-communal man lived. It

was Plato's argument that to use another human being for sexual gratification is innately immoral, except within the convention of marriage, which is an ideal

scenario in that it unites the twin " blessings" of friendship and reproduction (Louden and Schollmeier, 171). (It is within this ethic that Plato condemned the physical act of homosexuality.) This argument is frequently referred to in modern-day jurisprudence and exists as one of the most lasting and influential philosophical legacies from ancient Greece. Plato's conception of morality continues to wield considerable influence in the ongoing debate over human sexuality. Modern-day constraints on sexual liberty can be seen as a carry-over from Plato's admonition to see physical attraction as an attraction to Beauty itself.

The various permutations of the debate over homosexuality (i. e. the immorality/morality of gay sex, of homosexual marriage, etc.) contain a common thread that harkens back to the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. It is part of a philosophical continuum that includes Christian church " fathers" such as St. Augustine, whose interpretation was that procreative sex is acceptable but that any other form of sexual union is sinful (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2002). That this view of personal morality was not necessarily shared by all of the ancient Greek philosophers does not obscure the fact that sex as a moral concern is a product of the Socratic system of inquiry and debate. This led to the inclusion of anti-homosexual legislation in the Justinian Code, circa 529 A. D., and the long, subsequent

history of prohibitive legal constraints on sex, with punishments ranging from imprisonment to torture and execution.

Socrates and Plato were profoundly concerned with ethics, but Aristotle was the first to devote an entire written treatise to the subject in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. “ Plato’s *Republic*, for example, does not treat ethics as a distinct subject matter; nor does it offer a systematic examination of the nature of happiness, virtue, voluntaries, pleasure, or friendship” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2001). Plato discusses these phenomena, but they were not treated as a whole and discussed together in a unified work before Aristotle (2001). Aristotle also established the practice of expounding on a subject based on the collective wisdom of learned individuals rather than through Platonic dialogue. This was his approach in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, a profoundly influential philosophical contemplation of how human beings may achieve *eudaimonia*, a state which translates approximately to “ happiness.” Aristotle differs from his contemporaries and predecessors in that he is not satisfied with *eudaimonia* in theory alone, but as a condition that should be put into daily practice. In other words, a man should not merely intellectualize *eudaimonia* but must live according to its precepts. The *Nicomachean Ethics* is generally considered Aristotle’s most influential work. It had a formative effect on the development of medieval philosophy, where it was expressed anew in the words of Thomas Aquinas. In his *Commentaries on the ‘ Nicomachean Ethics,’* Aquinas proposed that Aristotle “ had said everything needful for happiness in this life” (Jaffa, 2011). That being the case, Aquinas found it unnecessary and inappropriate to hold forth

on the subject beyond what Aristotle had already said, thus avoiding interpretation and turning instead to commentary (2011). The Ethics were also important to the Stoics, who concurred with Aristotle's notion of eudaimonia and the individual's quest for the virtue of happiness. Specifically, the Stoics parted ways with Aristotle over the belief that virtue itself is the only good. The Stoics argued that external factors, which Aristotle accepts as parts of a greater whole necessary for happiness, were not pertinent to the pursuit of virtue and as such should be left aside. However, the Stoics insisted on the importance of health, beauty and other virtuous qualities.

Like Aristotle, the Stoics believed morality was not merely an ideal to be admired and striven for, but to be lived. For Panaetius and Posidonius, virtue as an ideal alone is of little worth. Panaetius "seems to have shifted the emphasis of Stoic thought away from the sage to the average morally imperfect individual, and from a philosophy that trained the soul to face adversity to a useful code of decorum for everyday life" (Russo, 2000). It is in this spirit that the founders of the Christian church adopted many principles of the Stoic ethos, which has lived on in other guises. As the moral value of communal living and the virtues of *arête* and *agathos* changed to meet the changing needs of society, and to help human beings explain and justify the world around them, Stoicism evolved to help the individual bear suffering and hardship in an increasingly violent and dangerous world. Between the years 1200 B. C. and 200 A. D., the ancient Greeks laid the intellectual foundation for what we today regard as modern society. The

greatest minds of the ancient world are justly famed for creating the disciplines of science, mathematics, rhetoric and countless other fields of inquiry and learning. But it can be argued that the philosophical concept of moral virtue is the greatest practical contribution of Greek thought. The Greeks' remarkable ability to adapt philosophy to the exigencies of an ever-changing world is part of an even more important and enduring legacy. This inheritance has furnished civilization with a virtuous ideal and a model of behavior that benefits the community as a whole. It is this understanding that social change brings with it the need to adapt moral codes that the great philosophers of ancient Greece have bestowed to us.

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