'Intellectual history at its best' Nick Spencer, Theos Think Tank

'As Larry Siedentop's erudite and provocative cultural history shows, inhabitants of the pre-Christian world did not think of themselves as "individuals" in the way we understand the world today . . . *Inventing the Individual* spans 2,000 years of history, but it has a 21st century message . . . Siedentop has made an original contribution to this intriguing historical debate – and proved that he at least is not afraid to stand out from the crowd' Andrew Lynch, *Sunday Business Post*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larry Siedentop was appointed to the first post in intellectual history ever established in Britain, at Sussex University in the 1970s. From there he moved to Oxford, becoming Faculty Lecturer in Political Thought and a Fellow of Keble College. His writings include a study of Tocqueville, an edition of Guizot's *History of Civilization in Europe* and *Democracy in Europe*, which has been translated into a dozen languages. Siedentop was made CBE in 2004.

LARRY SIEDENTOP

# Inventing the Individual

## *The Origins of Western Liberalism*

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

First published by Allen Lane 2014
Published in Penguin Books 2015

005

Copyright © Larry Siedentop, 2014

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 9.24/12.40pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-141-00954-4

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

*In memory of my parents*

# I
# The Ancient Family

If we in the West are to understand the world we have created, we must first of all understand another world very remote from our own – remote, not in space, but in time.

The distant past often lives on in surprising ways. Let us take the practice of a man who carries his bride over the threshold of their new home. Who would suppose that this amiable custom is the survival of beliefs that underpinned a society utterly different from our own? It was in many ways a repugnant society. It was a society in which the worship of ancestors, the family as a cult and primogeniture created radically unequal social identities, not just between men and women but also between the first-born son and other male offspring.

So to understand a custom that in its origins was not amiable but stern and obligatory, we must put our preconceptions to one side. We must imagine ourselves into a world where action was governed by norms reflecting exclusively the claims of the family, its memories, rituals and roles, rather than the claims of the individual conscience. We must imagine ourselves into a world of humans or persons who were not 'individuals' as we would understand them now.

Since the sixteenth century and the advent of the nation-state, people in the West have come to understand 'society' to mean an association of individuals. Until recently that understanding was accompanied by a sense of difference, a sense that other cultures had a different basis of organization, whether that was caste, clan or tribe. But in recent decades the Western impact on the rest of the world through capitalism, the spread of democracy and the language of human rights has weakened such a sense of difference. Globalization has made it easier to project an individualized model of society – one

that privileges individual preferences and rational choice – onto the whole world.

We have become victims of our own success. For we are in danger of taking this primacy of the individual as something 'obvious' or 'inevitable', something guaranteed by things outside ourselves rather than by historical convictions and struggles. Of course, every human has his or her own body and mind. But does this establish that human equality is decreed by nature rather than culture?

Nature, in the form of genetic endowment, is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition. A legal foundation for equality, in the form of fundamental rights for every person, is also required. In order to see this, it is important to understand how far the Western world has moved away from its origins, as well as how and why. We need to follow the steps between then and now. It will not always be easy. Widespread complacency about the victory of an individualized model of society reflects a worrying decline in historical understanding. For example, to regard Aristotle's definition of slaves as 'living tools', or the presumption in antiquity that women could not be fully rational agents, merely as 'mistakes' – symptoms of an underdeveloped sense of justice – scarcely advances comprehension of the past. After all, radical social inequality was far easier to sustain and more plausible in societies where literacy was so restricted.

It is commonplace to locate Western cultural origins in Greece, Rome and Judaeo-Christianity. Which of these sources should be considered the most important? The question has received different answers at different periods. In the middle ages, Christianity was seen as the crucial source, a view that the sixteenth-century Reformation preserved. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment saw things differently, however. In their attack on 'superstition' and clerical privileges, Enlightenment thinkers sought to minimize the moral and intellectual distance between modern Europe and Graeco-Roman antiquity. They did this by maximizing the gap between the 'dark' middle ages and the 'light' of their own age. For them, natural science and rational enquiry had replaced Christian belief as the agency of human progress. The liberation of the individual from feudal social hierarchies – as well as the liberation of the human mind from self-serving clerical dogmas – represented the birth of modernity.





So the millennium between the fall of the Western Roman empire and the Renaissance became an unfortunate interlude, a regression in humanity. Gibbon's famous history of Roman decline and fall invited modern Europeans to share in elegant mourning for antiquity, mixing sadness with the fun of anti-clerical mockery. As for the moral import of Christian beliefs, it often received short shrift. Gibbon's comment about a late Roman matron who gave her daughter to Christ because she was determined to be 'the mother-in-law' of God says it all. For Gibbon and many of his contemporaries, the modern era of individual emancipation was a return to the freer, secular spirit of antiquity – a view that remains widespread, even if it is now largely purged of virulent anti-clericalism.

But just how free and secular were ancient Greece and Rome? In order to answer that question, we have to probe the religious and moral beliefs that originally gave rise to the institutions of the ancient city-state, the *polis*. For those beliefs shaped a distinctive conception of society, a conception of society that was not seriously challenged until the first century AD.

Once we look closely at the beliefs and practices which shaped Greece and Rome in their infancy, and which survived in large part at their apogee, we find ourselves drawn back to an utterly remote moral world – to an Indo-European world that antedated even the polytheism we normally associate with Greece and Rome. We find ourselves entering a mind-set that generated a conception of society in which the family was everything. It was not only (in our terms) a civil but also a religious institution, with the paterfamilias acting not only as the family's magistrate but also as its high priest.

To recapture that world – to see and feel what acting in it was like – requires an extraordinary imaginative leap. The writer who has best succeeded in making that leap into the minds of the peoples settling Greece and the Italian peninsula several millennia ago was a French historian, Fustel de Coulanges. His book *The Ancient City* (1864), one of the most remarkable books of the nineteenth century, reveals how prehistoric religious beliefs shaped first the domestic and then the public institutions of Greece and Rome. It exposes the nature of the ancient family. 'The study of the ancient rules of private law enables us to obtain a glimpse, beyond the times that are called historic,

of a succession of centuries during which the family was the sole form of society.'[1]

Working backwards from the earliest Greek and Roman law codes, Fustel de Coulanges explores a world in which ancestor worship created a domestic religion. His book remains by far 'the most influential of modern works on the ancient city'.[2] Yet Fustel himself distrusted much modern writing about antiquity, apparently considering that terms like 'rationality' and 'private property' can introduce anachronism and prevent us from entering minds and institutions so different from our own. 'If we desire to understand antiquity, our first rule should be to support ourselves upon the evidence that comes from the ancients.'[3] It is that determination that gives Fustel's work its great value.

Fustel draws not only on the first law codes, but also on the earliest historians, philosophers and playwrights in order to recapture the meaning of the beliefs that shaped the ancient family and city. He may at times exaggerate the symmetry and reach of those beliefs, when tracing the emergence of the Greek and Roman polis from a prehistoric society of families. Other causes were at work. The reality was at times more messy than Fustel suggests. For the way humans understand themselves never captures the whole truth. It selects, simplifies and at times distorts. Nonetheless, Fustel's ability to trace the roots of institutions from language itself and early law is remarkable. Thus, his account remains close to the understanding which ancient thinkers – not least Aristotle – had of their own social development.[4] Their beliefs about themselves were Fustel's central concern. They will also be ours.

For Fustel, at its origin the ancient family was both the focus and the medium of religious belief. It was an instrument of immortality, at once a metaphysic and a cult. The practices of the ancient family met the needs of self-conscious creatures seeking to overcome the fact of death. Around the family hearth – with the father tending its sacred fire, offering sacrifices, libations and incantations learned from his father – members of the family achieved union with their ancestors and prepared their future. The fire on the family hearth could not be allowed to die out, for it was deemed to be alive. Its flickering, immaterial flame did not just represent the family's ancestors. It *was* their





ancestors, who were thought to live underground and who had to be provided with food and drink, if they were not to become malevolent spirits. Tending the fire therefore became an overarching obligation. The eldest son would succeed his father as custodian of the rites of the family hearth, that is, as its high priest. And his eldest son would follow him.

The circle established by religious belief was exclusively domestic. Gods could not be shared. Only deceased males related by blood could be worshipped as family gods. And it was believed that dead ancestors would only accept offerings from members of the family. Strangers were therefore excluded from the worship of the dead, for fear of gross impropriety or sacrilege. 'The ancient Greek language has a very significant word to designate a family. It is . . . a word which signifies, literally, that which is near a hearth. A family was a group of persons whom religion permitted to invoke the same sacred fire, and to offer the funeral repast to the same ancestors.'[5] If the hearth was not properly protected and tended, the ancestors ('gods of the interior') who 'rested' beneath it would become dissatisfied and wandering, as demons making trouble for the living rather than as gods.

These beliefs in the sacred fire and divine ancestors, revealed by study of the roots of the Greek and Latin languages (which Fustel supplemented with other Indo-European sources such as the Vedas), should not be dismissed as mere anthropological curiosities. For practices established by these beliefs survived, even if modified, into historical times as the domestic practices of Greece and Rome. Indeed, they established the framework of everyday life until the advent of Christianity.

> In the house of every Greek and Roman was an altar; on this altar there had always to be a small quantity of ashes, and a few lighted coals. It was a sacred obligation for the master of every house to keep the fire up night and day. Woe to the house where it was extinguished. Every evening they covered the coal with ashes to prevent them from being entirely consumed. In the morning the first care was to revive this fire with a few twigs. The fire ceased to glow upon the altar only when the entire family had perished; an extinguished hearth, an extinguished family, were synonymous expressions among the ancients.[6]

The absolute authority of the eldest male, keeper of the sacred fire and preserver of the family cult, later found expression as paterfamilias. His authority was a direct consequence of religious belief. And for any son to remain single was deemed to be a dereliction of duty, because it was a threat to the immortality of the family.

Other domestic practices in Greece and Rome – the subordinate role of women, the nature of marriage, property rights and inheritance rules – were also direct consequences of religious belief. Let us take the role of women first. Women could participate in the worship of the dead only through their father or husband. For descent was traced exclusively through the male line. But even then religion governed the definition of relationships so entirely that an adopted son, once he was admitted to the family worship, shared its ancestors, while a son who abandoned the family worship ceased altogether to be a relation, becoming unknown.

If we return to the example of a bride being carried across the threshold of her new home, we can now begin to understand the origins of the practice. In a world where the family was the only social institution, and the family worship the source of personal identity, the move from one family to another was a truly momentous step for a young woman, a step that changed her identity completely. So what had to happen for a marriage to take place? First, the daughter had to be separated for ever from her own family, in a formal ceremony before its sacred fire. But in renouncing her family worship, she lost all identity. She became, temporarily, a non-person. That is why her future husband had to carry her across the threshold of his family house. Only when she had been received into the worship of her new family, in another solemn ceremony before their sacred fire, did she acquire a new identity – an identity that enabled her to enter and leave the house of her own accord. Now, once again, she had ancestors and a future.

Clearly, the family – past, present and future – was the basic unit of social reality. It was necessarily the building block of any larger social units. Nothing could legitimately violate its domain. Fustel argues that this reflected a prehistoric period when the family, more or less extended, was the only social institution, long before the growth of cities and governments. Beating the bounds of the family domain was





understood as establishing not just a physical but also a moral frontier. Outside that frontier were strangers and enemies. Nor were these two sharply distinguished. Initially at least, those outside the family circle were not deemed to share any attributes with those within. No common humanity was acknowledged, an attitude confirmed by the practice of enslavement.

There was an intimate connection between these beliefs about the nature of the family and the origin of the idea of property rights. The family hearth or altar, and with it the divine ancestors or gods of the family, provided the focus of a sedentary life, of a fixed relationship with the soil.

> There are three things which, from the most ancient times, we find founded and solidly established in these Greek and Roman societies: the domestic religion; the family; and the right of property – three things which had in the beginning a manifest relation, and which appear to have been inseparable. The idea of private property existed in the religion itself. Every family had its hearth and its ancestors. These gods could be adored only by this family, and protected it alone. They were its property.[7]

The boundaries of the family property were also the boundaries of a sacred domain. Just as two sacred fires and the gods they embodied could not be merged, even through intermarriage, so family enclosures had to remain distinct.

This primitive belief survived in practices centuries later, when the Greeks and Romans first built cities. For while urban houses had to be much closer together, they could not be contiguous or joined – some space, however slight, had to separate them. 'At Rome the law fixed two feet and a half as the width of the free space, which was always to separate two houses, and this space was consecrated to "the god of the enclosure".'[8] No doubt the building of tenements later compromised this prohibition. But it shaped Roman property law at the outset.

Today when we see other humans, we see them first of all as individuals with rights, rather than family members, each with an assigned status. That is, we now see humans as rational agents whose ability to reason and choose makes it right to attribute to them an underlying

equality of status, a moral equality. We are even inclined to see this moral equality as a fact of perception rather than a social valuation, so ingrained is our assumption that rational agency demands equal concern and respect.

Yet as we can already see it was not always so. In recapturing the prehistoric religious beliefs and practices that gave rise to the Greek and Roman city, the roots of their domestic institutions, we find ourselves entering a world of, so to speak, small family churches. No one was allowed to worship at more than one hearth or sacrifice to more than one series of divine ancestors – for each series constituted a perpetual divinity, joining past, present and future family members and protecting them exclusively. To be involved in sacrifices at more than one sacred hearth would have been seen as monstrous, an impiety likely to bring disaster to both families.

As each family had its own gods, from whom it sought protection and to whom it offered sacrifices, separation from the family worship involved losing all personal identity. That is why Fustel de Coulanges was right to insist that the ancient family was founded, not on birth, affection or physical force, but rather on religion. Powerful religious beliefs that antedated belief in the gods surrounding Zeus or Jupiter shaped the domestic institutions of the Greeks and Romans. These beliefs reflected a period when there were only families, more or less extended – that is, a period before the creation of cities.

Larger associations did, however, gradually develop. And the emergence of polytheism was a symptom of the development of such associations. If, originally, the only unit of lasting human association was the family, and the basis of that association was religious belief, then certain conditions had to be satisfied before wider associations became possible. Before cities could emerge, new associations of families had to develop – first the *gens* or extended family, then clans (called phratries in Greek and *curiae* in Latin), and finally tribes. Fustel did not claim that there was always a tie of family within these larger associations. But when they were formed, their beliefs obliged them to find a common divinity. Each extension of human association required the establishment of a new worship, recognition of a divinity superior to the domestic divinities.

Vestiges of these intermediate associations long survived amid the





institutions of the Greek and Roman city. In so far as each step forward in human association required an extension of religious belief – the acknowledgement of shared divinities – the original model of the domestic religion continued to impose itself. Its tenacity still strikes ancient historians.[9]

Evidently we are a long way from the Enlightenment's vision of a free, secular spirit dominating antiquity, a world untrammelled by religious authority or priesthood. Driven by anti-clerical convictions, these eighteenth-century thinkers failed to notice something important about the Graeco-Roman world. They failed to notice that the ancient family began as a veritable church. It was a church which constrained its members to an extent that can scarcely be exaggerated. The father, representing all his ancestors, was himself a god in preparation. His wife counted only as part of her husband, having ancestors and descendants only through him. The authority of the father as priest and magistrate initially extended even to the right to repudiate or kill his wife as well as his children. Celibacy and adultery were accounted serious crimes, for they threatened, in different ways, the family worship.

Yet the father exercised his authority on the basis of beliefs shared by the family. His was not an arbitrary power. The overwhelming imperative was to preserve the family worship, and so to prevent his ancestors, untended, being cast into oblivion. This restriction of affection to the family circle gave it an extraordinary intensity. Charity, concern for humans as such, was not deemed a virtue, and would probably have been unintelligible. But fulfilling obligations attached to a role in the family was everything. 'The sense of duty, natural affection, the religious idea – all these were confounded, were considered as one, and were expressed by the same word.'[10] That word was piety (*pietas*).

Nor should we suppose that the claims of family piety were much weakened in later, historical times, when families were joined in larger associations. Observing those claims continued, for example, to shape the daily routine of the Roman citizen. 'Morning and evening he invokes his fire . . . and his ancestors; in leaving and entering his house, he addresses a prayer to them,' Fustel notices. 'Every meal is a religious act, which he shares with his domestic divinities; birth, initiation,

the taking of the toga, marriage, and the anniversaries of all these events, are the solemn acts of his worship.'[11]

Virgil's great epic, the *Aeneid*, written when the Roman republic was giving way to the empire, is a testament to the claims of piety in circumstances of distress. Bernini's statue of Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius – kept today at the Villa Borghese in Rome – embodies those claims. It shows Aeneas, after the fall of Troy, carrying away his father Anchises and the household gods, while his son Ascanius carries the household fire. Father and son are carrying away what mattered most to them. It is a powerful visual representation of the idea of piety.

On close inspection, then, the domestic institutions of the Greeks and Romans – institutions that provided the foundation for their public law and political institutions – were shaped by beliefs about the claims of sacred ancestors. Nowhere is this clearer than in the idea of property rights that resulted. In the earliest Greek and Roman law, the sale of property was virtually forbidden. And even in later, historical ages such a sale was surrounded by prohibitions and penalties. The reason is clear. Family property was integral to the family worship. 'Religion required that the hearth should be fixed to the soil, so that the tomb should neither be destroyed nor displaced. Suppress the right of property and the sacred fire would be without a fixed place, the families would become confounded and the dead would be abandoned and without worship.'[12] It followed that property belonged not to an individual man, but to the family. The eldest male possessed the land as a trust. The rule of succession made this clear. For property followed the same rule as family worship. It devolved upon the eldest son, or, in the absence of male children, it went to the nearest male relative. Daughters could not inherit. In Athens if the deceased had only a daughter, she was required to marry the heir – even if the heir or she was already married!

The disposal of property was not a matter of contract or individual choice. In the earliest period the Greeks and Romans understood property primarily as a means of perpetuating the family worship. In Athens, the will or right of testament was unknown until Solon's time (sixth century BC), and his innovations only permitted it for the childless. It later made headway only against very strong religious scruples. Fustel de Coulanges has no difficulty finding examples of the survival





of such scruples even in Athens' greatest period. Plato, in his *Laws*, treats contemptuously the wish of a man on his deathbed to dispose of his property as he pleases: 'Thou who art only a pilgrim here below, does it belong to thee to decide such affairs? Thou art the master neither of thy property nor of thyself; thou and thy estate, all these things, belong to thy family; that is to say, to thy ancestors and to thy posterity.'[13]

It is tempting for a moment to adopt the idiom of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and call these beliefs 'prejudices'. These prejudices founded a hierarchical conception of society in antiquity, and they long survived the earliest, undiluted forms of ancestor worship. It is true that many legal arrangements founded on these prejudices were modified in historical times: the disposal of property was made easier and paternal authority came to be somewhat restricted. Changes occurred which prepared the ground for a moral revolution.

Yet the Greeks and Romans continued to understand 'society' as an association of families, each with its own cult – and not as an association of individuals. Hence justice within the family remained basically a matter for the paterfamilias, not for the city. Paternal authority deriving from the domestic religion entailed the subordination of women.

> The Greek laws and those of Rome are to the same effect. As a girl, she is under her father's control; if her father dies, she is governed by her brothers; married, she is under the guardianship of her husband; if the husband dies, she does not return to her own family, for she has renounced that forever by the sacred marriage; the widow remains subject to the guardianship of her husband's agnates – that is to say, of her own sons, if she has any, or, in default of sons, of the nearest kindred.[14]

Thus, the inviolability of the domestic sphere and the exclusive character of family worship were intimately joined together. They established a moral boundary that the ancient city, as it developed, was obliged to respect. The domain of legislation stopped at the property of the family. Interfering with property was interfering with a domestic religion, that is, with the most sacred obligations. The treatment of debtors confirms this. For while a debtor lost control of his own labour, his property could not be touched.

We are now in a better position to understand the chief consequence of Greek and Roman religious beliefs for the ordering of their society and government. It is a consequence which even Fustel does not identify clearly enough. In order to understand it, we must abandon the modern distinction between public and private spheres, the distinction that underpins our notions of civil society and individual liberty.

For the Greeks and Romans, the crucial distinction was not between the public and private spheres. It was between the public and domestic spheres. And the domestic sphere was understood as the sphere of the family, rather than as that of individuals endowed with rights. The domestic sphere was a sphere of inequality. Inequality of roles was fundamental to the worship of the ancient family. Little wonder, then, that when the ancient city was created citizenship was available only to the paterfamilias and, later, his sons. Women, slaves and the foreign-born (who had no hearth or worship of their own, no recognized ancestors) were categorically excluded. Family piety ruled them out. Piety raised a barrier that could not be scaled.

There was an intensity of feeling within the ancient family unknown to us. But this intensity came at the price of moral transparency – of what we could call the claims of humanity.

9/26/15 – EXCELLENT. HELPFUL FOR UNDERSTANDING AKSUM



# 2

# The Ancient City

We have explored a pre-historic world in which the family was everything, a world in which obligation, gods and priesthood were exclusively domestic. How do we get from such a world to the world of cities and historical memory in Greece and Italy? How did the range of human association increase, gradually giving birth to political institutions, to the polis or city-state – indeed, to the very idea of politics?

It is important to find out, because the city-state later gave rise to a tradition of political discourse – usually called classical republicanism – which is still influential. It is a tradition that has at times been invoked to condemn such basic institutions of the modern world as the nation-state, the market and representative government. This was particularly the case during the second half of the eighteenth century. Perhaps inspired by the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, leading French revolutionaries began to invoke the 'virtue' of ancient citizens – their single-minded concern with *res publica* or the public weal – in an attempt to remould European society and government. The rhetoric of Robespierre, for example, suggested that ancient citizenship provided the test of 'true' liberty. For him, ancient liberty became the most authentic liberty.

This claim ought to give us pause. We have already discovered an ancient world which was by no means secular. We have discovered that the family and its worship of sacred ancestors – veritable small churches – were the building blocks of ancient society. If that society did not sustain anything like the role of the individual, with equality before the law and individual rights, how can its political institutions be identified with liberty? What kind of liberty is being spoken of,

when such a claim is made? Did the development of the ancient city lead, after all, to the destruction of the family as a cult and the emergence of individual rights? Did ancient citizenship mark the advent of secularism? And if not, what was the meaning of ancient liberty?

To answer these questions, we must look more closely at the transition from a world of families to a world of cities – moving from the third and second millennia to the first millennium BC.

Although the family which shaped pre-Greek and Roman institutions was our point of departure, it would be a mistake to conceive of that family in modern terms, as anything like a modern nuclear family. The very religious beliefs which helped to constitute that family led to its rapid expansion in size. Younger sons and their offspring remained attached to the family hearth and its sacred fire. Moreover, as the number of subordinate families grew in successive generations, the patriarchal family (or *gens*) acquired dependants. Some became permanently attached to the family by being admitted to an inferior role – resembling that of women – in the family worship. There might also be slaves, with no religious connection, attached to the family.

How did such patriarchal families or *gentes* eventually form larger associations? They did so in the only way known to them. That is, they came to acknowledge a shared ancestor and founded a common worship. An altar was raised to a divinity or 'hero' held in common. A ceremonial meal – comparable to the 'sacred' repast of the household – was then established. These wider associations required their own priesthood, assembly and rites. For a new religious identity sustained the phratry or *curia*, what we might call a clan. When these new associations, in turn, increased in size and proximity, they came to establish a still wider association, called a tribe. The tribe too required its sacred altar and a god. That god was also generally 'a man deified, a hero'.

The ancient city came into being when several tribes became associated, by founding a common worship, a worship that supplemented rather than replaced the pre-existing worships of *gens*, phratry or curia and tribe. Here Fustel de Coulanges's account has come in for criticism. He may well have exaggerated the coherence attending the founding of cities. Were they always founded by clans having familial origins? Probably not.[1] Yet, as we have seen, Fustel did not claim that





there was always a tie of family within these larger associations. Nor does his argument exclude the likelihood that incorporation in a polis changed the role of associations. And one fact remains. In terms of their formal organization, both Greece and Rome built civic institutions around the claims of such subsidiary groups. They catered for the claims of phratries or *curia*s as well as tribes, giving each a formal role. The city that emerged was thus a confederation of cults, an association superimposed on other associations, all modelled on the family and its worship. The ancient city was not an association of individuals.

Religious ideas expanded with the increased scale of association. Fustel does not argue that religious progress brought about social progress in any simple way, but he does emphasize the intimate connection between the two. Thus, as the scale of association increased, the gods of nature or polytheism became more important – for these were gods who could more easily be shared, gods less exclusively domestic than ancestors, gods associated with the forces of nature rather than with divine ancestors. These were gods who represented the sea, the wind, fertility, light, love, hunting, with familiar names such as Apollo, Neptune, Venus, Diana and Jupiter. The building of civic temples to these gods offered physical evidence of the enlargement of religious ideas. Still, the gods of each city remained exclusive, so that while two cities might both adore 'Jupiter', he had different attributes in each city.

Particularism was the rule. Even after a city was founded, it was inconceivable for the city not to respect the divine ancestors, the sacred rites and magistracies of the different groups that had attended its foundation. For the souls of the dead were deemed to live on under the ground of the cities they had helped to create. The statesman Solon, who in the sixth century BC endowed Athens with laws, was given the following advice by the oracle of Delphi: 'Honour with worship the chiefs of the country, the dead who live under the earth.' The city had to respect their authority in matters concerning their descendants. For the city's authority was all of a piece with theirs. Gods and groups marched hand in hand.

This corporate, sacramental character of the ancient city dominated its formal organization. Whether it was a question of procedures for voting, military organization or religious sacrifices, care was taken to

represent tribes, *curiae* and families – and to conduct civic life through them. It was deemed important that men should be associated most closely with others who sacrificed at the same altars. Altars were the bonds of human association. That emerged in the Greek and Roman conception of warfare. In one of Euripides' plays, a soldier asserts that 'the gods who fight with us are more powerful than those who fight on the side of the enemy'.[3]

The progress of a young Athenian or Roman towards full citizenship recapitulated the progress of association that underpinned the city. Born into a family and joined to its worship a few days after birth, the youth was years later initiated successively into the cults of curia and tribe (each involved a ceremonial meal, a 'sacred' repast), before in his late teens being formally accepted as a citizen in a public ceremony.

> At the age of sixteen or eighteen, he [a young Athenian] is presented for admission to the city. On that day, in the presence of an altar, and before the smoking flesh of a victim, he pronounces an oath, by which he binds himself always to respect . . . the religion of the city. From that day he is initiated into the public worship, and becomes a citizen. If we observe this young Athenian, step by step, from worship to worship, we have a symbol of the degrees through which human association has passed. The course which this young man is constrained to follow is that which society first followed.[4]

The successive worships into which the ancient citizen was initiated left no space for individual conscience or choice. These worships claimed authority over not just his actions but also his thoughts. Their rules governed his relations with himself as well as others. There was no sphere of life into which these rules could not enter – whether it was a matter of dress, deportment, marriage, sport, education, conversation or even ambition. If a citizen was deemed likely to acquire too much influence over others, and thus become a potential threat to the government of the city, he could be ostracized, that is, driven from the city. No subversive action or proof of intent was required. The safety and welfare of the city was everything.

The religious character of the ancient city was stamped on its form of government. 'If we wanted to give an exact definition of a citizen,





we should say that it was a man who had the religion of the city.'[5] Originally, the magistrates of the city were also its priests; the two functions were not distinguished. The ceremonies attached to every association, the sacred meals dedicated to their presiding deities, were in the city the responsibility of the magistrates. Honouring the gods of the city was their primary duty. And just as the gods had originally been exclusively domestic, the gods of the city were not shared with strangers. Even gods of nature adopted by a city became, as we have seen, patriotic. Thus, the priesthood of one city had no connection with the priesthood of another city. There were no doctrines held in common. For the gods of the city were exclusively interested in its welfare, its protection. They were 'jealous' of it.

Kingship was the highest priesthood, presiding over the cult established with the city itself. The king was hereditary high priest of that association of associations that was the ancient city. The king's other functions, as magistrate and military leader, were simply the adjuncts of his religious authority. Who better to lead the city in war than the priest whose knowledge of the sacred formulas and prayers 'saved' the city every day? And, later, when kingship gave way to republican regimes, the chief magistrate of the city – the archon in Athens, the consul in Rome – remained a priest whose first duty was to offer sacrifices to the city's gods. In fact, the circlet of leaves worn on the head of archons when conducting such sacrifices became a universal symbol of authority: the crown.

Just as the highest magistrate was a priest, so the laws he defended were originally the laws of a religion, a perpetual endowment transmitted to the city by its heroic founder. Laws were the necessary consequences of religious belief. There was nothing like the modern notion of sovereignty, of a merely human agency with the authority to create new law. The priests jealously guarded the laws of the city, for the laws were understood to be the work of the gods. Indeed, they probably took the form of prayers before they came to be written down, and at first they may have been sung.

> These ancient verses were invariable texts. To change a letter of them, to displace a word, to alter the rhythm, was to destroy the law itself, by destroying the sacred form under which it was revealed to man. The

> law was like a prayer, which was agreeable to the divinity only on condition that it was recited correctly, and which became impious if a single word in it was changed. In primitive law, the exterior, the letter, was everything; there is no need of seeking the sense or spirit of it. The value of the law is not in the moral principle that it contains, but in the words that make up the formula. Its force is in the sacred words that compose it.[6]

Even when laws were written down and became more numerous, they continued to be deposited with the priests. They could not be inspected by just anyone. For the laws were civil in a stringent sense: that is, they applied only to citizens. Living in a city was by no means to be placed under the protection of its laws. For example, neither slaves nor strangers resident in the city had such protection. Laws could establish a relationship only between men who shared in the worship of the city, sacrificing at the same altars. They alone were citizens.

Religious belief shaped the character of ancient 'patriotism'. Serving the 'fathers-land' emerges in the word itself. The defenders of an ancient city under siege were not moved by interest as we understand the term. They were not defending a public institution that had created and guaranteed individual rights. Neither were they inspired by the kind of historical narratives that have been created to celebrate and reinforce the identities of modern nation-states. There was nothing self-serving, abstract or sentimental about ancient patriotism.

The ancient citizen saw himself as defending the land of his ancestors, who were also his gods. His ancestors were inseparable from the ground of the city. To lose that ground was to lose the gods of the family. Indeed, the loss of the city meant that the gods had already abandoned it. That is why, whenever a new city was about to be founded, the first public rite involved its members digging a trench to receive soil carried from their previous city, representing the soil in which their ancestors had been buried. Citizens could then still say this was the land of their ancestors, *terra patria*. In Plutarch's account, Romulus, the founder of Rome, did exactly that, in order to establish a new residence for his ancestral gods. The foundation of a city was not the construction of a few houses, but the assertion of a hereditary religious identity, 'patriotism'.





When defending his city, the ancient citizen was therefore defending the very core of his identity. Religion, family and territory were inseparable, a combination which turned ancient patriotism into an overwhelming passion. The enslavement that often followed the unsuccessful defence of a city merely confirmed a truly dreadful anterior fact: the loss of identity that necessarily accompanied the loss of domestic gods.

We can now understand why patriotism was not only the most intense feeling but also the highest possible virtue for the ancient citizen. Everything that was important to him – his ancestors, his worship, his moral life, his pride and property – depended upon the survival and well-being of the city. That is why devotion to the 'sacred fatherland' was deemed the supreme virtue. In devoting himself to the city before everything else, the citizen was serving his gods. No abstract principle of justice could give him pause. Piety and patriotism were one and the same thing. For the Greeks, to be without patriotism, to be anything less than an active citizen, was to be an 'idiot'. That, indeed, is what the word originally meant, referring to anyone who retreated from the life of the city.

So it is no accident that exile was the most severe punishment the citizen of a polis could suffer. It was worse than death, or rather it was a living death. To be exiled meant to be separated from the religious rites and relationships that were the source of personal identity. The city-state or polis was not simply a physical setting or place for the citizen. It was his whole life.

> Let him leave its sacred walls, let him pass the sacred limits of its territory, and he no longer finds for himself either a religion or a social tie of any kind. Everywhere else, except in his own country, he is outside the regular life and the law; everywhere else he is without a god, and shut out from all moral life. There alone he enjoys his dignity as a man, and his duties. Only there can he be a man.[7]

This, of course, is why Aristotle later famously argued that the life of the citizen was the only life worth living.

Fustel de Coulanges illustrates the nature of the ancient city by noticing that the ancients made a distinction we do not make. They distinguished the *urbs* from the *civitas* when referring to the city.

What is the difference? The *urbs* is the physical location, the place of assembly and worship. But the *civitas* is the moral nexus, the religious and political association of the citizens. And in unusual circumstances that association might survive the destruction of the *urbs*. That, for Fustel, is the significance of the story of Aeneas, as told by Virgil. By preserving the sacred fire of Troy, after the sack of the city, Aeneas has preserved the moral basis of its association – which is to say, its gods. His quest thereafter is really their quest. It is they who identify their new home as Rome, and their will that prevents him settling anywhere else, even in Dido's Carthage. The epic, then, is not about one man's struggle, but about the successful struggle of the gods of Troy to become the gods of Rome.

Gods gave the lead to their cities. Only by taking this assumption seriously can we understand the practices of Greek and Roman cities in historical times, when republican regimes had replaced the original kingships. Votes were not enough by themselves to confer legitimacy on magistrates. In Athens, drawing lots was deemed to be the best means of ascertaining the choice of the gods. In Rome, election to consulships could only take place from a list offered by the presiding priest, who had spent the previous night observing the skies while intoning the names of candidates. If the auspices were deemed unfavourable, a name was excluded. That is why the Romans sometimes found themselves electing candidates whom they despised, rather than popular figures. The will of the gods was what mattered.

It was this belief that led the Greeks and Romans into their (to us) strange practices of divination. 'If Romulus had been a Greek, he would have consulted the oracle of Delphi; if a Samnite, he would have followed the sacred animal – the wolf or the green woodpecker. Being a Latin, and a neighbour of the Etruscans, initiated into the augurial science, he asks the gods to reveal their will to him by the flight of birds.'[8] These practices did not disappear in the later development of cities. They survived long into Greek and Roman history.

By the sixth century BC, nonetheless, things had begun to change. In both Greece and Italy, a radically hieratic society – in which paterfamilias was combined with priesthood – came under attack from the lower classes, classes that previously had no part in the government of the city. We must remember how few in numbers the citizens





originally were. Citizens were originally simply the *patres*, something surviving in Roman usage when senators were called the 'fathers' of the city. In many cities younger sons could not become citizens while their father, the family's priest, was alive. Nor could the heads of junior branches of the family, formed over generations, claim that status. Even less could clients, who had no blood relationship to the family and its cult, have the privileges of citizenship.

Of course, to describe what was originally an unquestioned superiority of status as 'privilege' already suggests changing beliefs. It was symptomatic of a period when class conflicts began to erode the social structure on which the ancient city had been raised – conflicts between the 'equals' and 'inferiors' in Sparta, between the Eupatrids and thetes in Athens, and between the patricians and plebeians in Rome. But we ought not to exaggerate the extent or rapidity of change. Ancient beliefs, and the social structure they had created, were tenacious.

Even when social conflicts began to widen membership of the citizen class, the original basis of citizenship – sharing in the worship of the gods of the city – long remained. Evidence of the resistance of beliefs to change was the extreme difficulty of founding a single state in Greece out of its many city-states, a difficulty resting finally not so much on geography or technical backwardness, but on obstinate attachment to civic gods, who did not welcome strangers. Even marriage between people from different cities was viewed as strange, if not immoral. And when circumstances forced temporary alliances between cities, these would be represented on medals as two gods holding hands. The gods were not to be confounded!

Fear of the gods governed Greek and Roman conduct in war and in peace. Even if all the preparations had been made, an expedition or a battle could be postponed if the priests suddenly reported unfavourable auspices – a comet or partial eclipse perhaps, a flight of birds or something missing in the entrails of a sacrifice. Spartan campaigns were always regulated by the phases of the moon, while Athenian armies never undertook a campaign before the seventh day of the month. During the Peloponnesian War, the destruction of the Athenian fleet outside Syracuse – which led to the decline of Athens – owed not a little to reliance on omens. The Athenian, like the Roman, had unlucky days; on these days no marriage took place, no assembly was

held, and justice was not administered.'[9] To do otherwise, was to tempt the gods.

The intermingling of religion and government remained complete. From the sixth to the third century BC changes in the form of polis government – from monarchy to aristocracy, from aristocracy to democracy – did not reduce the authority of the city-state over its members. There was no notion of the rights of individuals against the claims of the city and its gods. There was no formal liberty of thought or action. Participation in the assembly and service as a magistrate, if chosen, were obligatory and enforced. Citizens belonged to the city, body and soul.

The liberty of the ancient citizen – celebrated by the classical republican tradition – was thus far removed from our own idea of liberty. Ancient liberty consisted of having a share in the government of the city, in public power. It consisted of the privilege and duty to attend the assembly, speak in debates, judge the arguments, take sides and vote, with the further possibility of serving as a magistrate or on a jury, if required. Ancient liberty did not tolerate indifference to the political process. The public thing, *res publica*, was everything.

The domestic sphere, with its personal attachments or relationships, might count as nothing. Fustel de Coulanges tells a story about Sparta, drawn from Plutarch, that Rousseau later held up to the eighteenth century as exemplary. The Spartan army had suffered a serious defeat at Leuctra, with terrible loss of life. When the news reached the city, relatives of the dead were required to appear 'with gay countenances', while the mothers of those who survived were required to weep and lament their survival. There is probably an element of myth here. Yet nothing better illustrates the unlimited demands of the ancient city – the absence of a private sphere with legitimate claims – than this story.

Citizenship, with its superior status and its share in public power, was demanding. Citizens were constantly on display – like actors performing before their public, a public consisting, however, of their inferiors, of younger sons, clients, women and slaves. If divested of the religious beliefs that had created the role, citizenship retained great aesthetic appeal, the appeal of superiority and power, gravitas and pride. Or so it must have seemed to a class of men who gradually





increased in numbers, a class settled in the polis but not forming part of its 'people'. Why not? The defining feature of this class, called in Rome the plebeians or *plebs*, was that it had no religious connection with the city or its foundation. Probably formed of later arrivals, the *plebs* had no domestic altars, and therefore no ancestors, no gods. The plebs did not have even that indirect connection with a family worship shared by clients. It was this class that, along with the clients, began to contest the limits of citizenship.

So the history of Greek city-states from the sixth century BC until the advent of the Roman empire is dominated by class conflict – by argument about who should be included in the citizen class. But argument was still limited by assumptions inherited from the cult of the ancient family. That is, there was no question of women, slaves or the foreign-born being included in public life. They remained confined to the domestic sphere, the sphere of inferiority. Only one city, Rome, offered an important exception to this rule.

The long period of aristocratic ascendancy in Greek and Italian cities, founded on the family and its worship, had already reduced kingship to a religious role, stripping kings of political authority. The reason for this is clear enough. Kings had frequently made common cause with the lower classes. They had formed alliances with clients and the *plebs*, directed against the power of the aristocracy. Challenged both from without (by a class which had no family worship or gods) and from within (by clients questioning the traditional ordering of the family), the aristocracy of the cities carried through a political revolution to avoid a social revolution.

Nonetheless, a social revolution slowly took place. Fustel de Coulanges, living in the mid-nineteenth century, drew on modern European history in order to understand that revolution. For it was a question of understanding a very gradual, incremental process, a transformation of social structure not unlike the process which had eroded feudal institutions in France from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century. Two of Fustel's immediate predecessors, François Guizot and Alexis de Tocqueville, had explored the role of class conflict in forwarding that process. Fustel finds something remarkably similar when trying to understand the social forces that undermined the aristocratic institutions resting on the ancient family and its worship.

Analysing a social revolution involved going beyond what could be found in the narratives of ancient historians. Their focus had been primarily political. They were concerned to describe and analyse observable political events in the world of city-states. Alliances, foreign wars and civil wars – these were their bread and butter. Even the subtlest of the ancient historians, Thucydides, takes the social structure of the polis largely for granted. Fustel, on the other hand, seeks to understand a fundamental change in that structure, drawing on incidental information in ancient sources, especially information about the nature and distribution of property.

The first major change took place within the patriarchal family. Primogeniture came under attack and gradually gave way, with the consequence not only that younger sons inherited and became full citizens, but also that junior branches of the ancient families or *gentes* became independent. These developments greatly increased the number of citizens, and reduced the power of the ancient family heads as priests.

A second major change followed. The clients of the family were gradually liberated, becoming free men. At the outset clients could not own property. They did not even have any security of tenure on land they worked for the paterfamilias. They were little better than slaves. 'Possibly the same series of social changes took place in antiquity which Europe saw in the middle ages, when the slaves in the country became serfs of the glebe, when the latter from serfs, taxable at will, were changed to serfs with a fixed rent, and when finally they were transformed . . . into peasant proprietors.'[10]

Fundamental to these changes was a rise in expectations. That rise was, in turn, due to the comparisons that became possible once the patriarchal family was merely part of a larger association, the polis or city-state. No longer was the paterfamilias, the magistrate and priest, the only representative of authority in sight, the only spokesman of the gods. The paterfamilias gradually lost his semi-sacred status through being immersed in civic life. His inferiors now 'could see each other, could confer together, could make an exchange of their desires and griefs, compare their masters, and obtain a glimpse of a better fate'.[11]

Obtaining the right of property was their first and strongest desire, preceding any claim for the full privileges of citizenship. But the latter





was bound to follow, for obtaining greater equality on one front only increased a sense of exclusion on the other. Citizenship, in turn, unleashed a process of abstraction which could and did threaten inherited inequalities.

No one understood this better than a series of rulers called tyrants. Tyranny was acceptable to the previously underprivileged classes because it was a means of undermining the old aristocracy. Tyrants were so called because 'kingship' evoked a religious role, a role that recalled the subordinations based on the ancient family and its worship. The lower classes supported tyrants in order to combat their former superiors. Tyranny was an instrument that could be discarded when it had served its purpose, unlike the sacred authority claimed by the original kings. It was an instrument serving a sense of relative deprivation.

The dynamics resulting from a sense of relative deprivation slowly destroyed the hold of the original aristocracy on the city. But it would be utterly wrong to conclude that it destroyed aristocracy as such. On the contrary, what moved the younger sons, clients and *plebs* was a desire to share in the privileges of the citizen class – to cut a figure comparable to that of a class which had hitherto combined the gravitas of priests, the pride of rulers, and the glory of warriors. It was a class that enjoyed being seen in a heroic pose, stripped for action. The ancient taste for nudity was no mere accident. Nudity expressed a sense of social superiority – the superiority of citizens who rose above mere domestic concerns, seeking glory for themselves through the city, and for the city through themselves. To be seen naked was to be seen as superior to the meretricious and even sordid wants of women, merchants and slaves.

The domestic sphere, a sphere of radical inferiority, remained. The social revolution, which reshaped ancient city-states in the centuries before their eclipse under the Roman empire, did not tamper with that sphere. The social revolution was a struggle of the underprivileged for greater privilege. It was not a struggle for justice, as we understand the term.

The claims of the city remained pre-eminent. An enemy of the city had no rights. A Spartan king, when asked about the justice of seizing a Theban citadel in peacetime, replied: 'Inquire only if it was useful,

for whenever an action is useful to our country, it is right.'[12] The treatment of conquered cities reflected this belief. Men, women, children and slaves were slaughtered or enslaved without compunction. Houses, fields, domestic animals, anything serving the gods of the foe might be laid waste. If the Romans spared the life of a prisoner, they required him to swear the following oath: 'I give my person, my city, my land, the water that flows over it, my boundary gods, my temples, my movable property, everything which pertains to the gods – these I give to the Roman people.'[13]

When the fortune of their own city was at stake, the Greeks and Romans were implacable.

9/26/25



# 3
# The Ancient Cosmos

The heroic role played out by the Greek and Roman citizen constantly confirmed his superiority. But it was not just a matter of ritual or public theatre. Whether as magistrate, priest or warrior, the citizen's actions were deemed to incorporate a powerful rationality. His actions were proper responses to the claims of the city and its gods. Decisions by the assembly of citizens allowed for no independent review. The idea of individual rights was absent. Social subordinates were, after all, not deemed to be fully rational. No doubt women, merchants and slaves had important social functions, but their minds did not rise to the public sphere and its concerns. Instead, gossip, mercenary calculation and uncomplaining obedience were their respective lots.

We are encountering a conception of 'reason' very different from that of the modern world, for it 'carried' within it hierarchical assumptions about both the social and the physical world. We can see these assumptions about the superiority of the citizen and his cult of honour emerging in Xenophon's dialogue, the *Hiero*:

> All creatures seem in a similar fashion to take pleasure in food, drink, sleep and sex. But that love of honour does not grow up in animals lacking speech. Nor, for that matter, can it be found in all human beings. The lust for honour and praise grows up only in those who are most fully distinguished from the beasts of the fields: which is to say that it grows up only in those judged to be real men and no longer mere human beings.[1]

The citizen was a kind of superman. Public life, founded on religious observances, gave citizens the opportunity to express both their

piety and patriotism. For citizens, it was assumed, joined a sense of the proper ordering of things to their taste for glory. What we would call their 'status' was understood rather as natural endowment. This assumption probably had roots in a period when citizens, relatively few in number, were not only priests and magistrates, but also had a virtual monopoly of literacy – with the status it conferred. However that may be, the assumption of superiority was later reinforced by the role of oratory in enlarged assemblies, the sophistication of public argument and the military prowess expected of citizens.

Yet gradual expansion of the citizen class did change the nature of its prestige. The sacerdotal family had to share the stage with new ways of organizing the citizenry. Family piety had to combine with new ways of thinking. In Athens, the move from aristocratic to democratic government altered the nature of the tribes. They became, in a sense, offshoots of the public assembly, reflecting the claims of citizenship and voting rather than of the sacerdotal family. A similar symptom of social change in Rome appeared when the army was no longer organized simply according to family and *gens*. Instead, centuries – that is, numbers – became the basis of its organization. Former clients and plebeians had often become rich (the introduction of money facilitating the circulation of property) and they played an increasingly important military role. The original aristocratic means of making war, the cavalry, had declined as compared to expensive, heavily armoured infantry: Greek hoplites and Roman legionaries. Thus numbers and money – introducing a touch of abstraction – came to count for more within the privileged citizen class, supplementing its religious foundation.

Wider participation in the government of the city, and the importance of public debate which resulted, had formidable intellectual consequences. New skills were fostered, skills required for careful argument and effective persuasion in the assembly. Logic and rhetoric thus came into existence as public disciplines. The ability to make a coherent case, defend it and present it persuasively to an audience of equals became a sine qua non for leadership in the city. The development of these critical and imaginative capacities contributed, by the fifth century BC, to the emergence of abstract, philosophical thinking out of religion and poetry. Athens became both its centre and a symbol.





Yet these developments had an important unintended consequence. Reason or rationality – *logos*, the power of words – became closely identified with the public sphere, with speaking in the assembly and with the political role of a superior class. Reason became the attribute of a class that commanded. At times reason was almost categorically fused with social superiority. So the assumption grew that reason could command – even when, paradoxically, it involved defining an immutable order or 'fate'. Thus the Roman writer Seneca felt able to prescribe the role of the stars: 'On even the slightest motion of these hang the fortunes of nations, and the greatest and smallest events are shaped to accord with the progress of a kindly or unkindly star.'[2]

The assumption that reason 'governed' shaped the understanding of both the social world and the physical world. In the physical world, the assumption emerged as a belief that purposes or ends (what Aristotle called 'final causes') governed all processes and entities. In that way, relationships within the non-human world were assimilated to reasons for acting in human life. It followed that reason could identify that towards which each thing 'naturally' tends, finding its proper place in a 'great chain of being'. In the social world, the assumption emerged as belief that there was a natural hierarchy, a superior class entitled by 'nature' to rule, constrain and, if need be, coerce. Thus, in a society where some were born to command and others to obey, the motivational power of reason seemed self-evident. Out of its own resources, reason could guarantee action.

This assumption deserves our attention. For it runs contrary to a central tradition in modern philosophy, especially to an empiricist tradition that gives reason a merely instrumental role. In this modern view, reason as a faculty cannot motivate: it does not move us to action. Reason merely provides us with the means of calculating the consequences of different courses of action. Characteristically, modern thought interposes a separate event in the individual – 'willing' – between deliberation and action. Yet even today it remains a matter of controversy whether Greek philosophers had a distinct concept of the will. If they did, it seems to have developed relatively late. What is more immediately striking is that Homeric Greek, the Greek of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, did not even have a word for 'intention'.[3]

By identifying rationality with social superiority – by taking for

granted the deference of inferiors, of a domestic sphere – the ancient world had less need for a doctrine of the will. It had less need to posit a separate event or faculty preceding action in every person. The notion of human agency was shaped by the structure of society. Some were simply born to command and others to obey. Hence there was no ontological gap between thought and action. The status of the person who reasoned guaranteed the availability of action if required.

We can see the persistence of this assumption in antiquity, even after philosophy had emerged from the critical habits fostered by public debate in the assemblies. In the *Republic*, Plato asks what a just society would be like. He replies by arguing that we can most easily understand what it would be like by analogy with a just person. So what is characteristic of a just person? A just person is governed by reason, the highest faculty. Reason governs actions, and draws on the appetites for fuel. What are the social implications, according to Plato? As reason is the attribute of only a few – in fact, only of philosophers – it is philosophers who therefore ought to govern. They ought to direct the actions of a warrior class, which is in turn sustained by a large inferior class of what we might now be inclined to call workers.

Plato's use of this analogy is revealing. While he ostensibly argues from a picture of the just self to that of a just society, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the argument really proceeds in the other direction – and that he conceives of a just self on the model of a radically stratified society, a society in which there are groups ready-made to act on the conclusions of deductive argument. Of course, Plato's argument does not necessarily identify philosopher-kings with the traditional citizen class. To that extent, we can see the impact of more abstract, philosophical reflection. But his conception of society remains one in which radical status differences ensure the harmony of thought and action. For Plato, everyone is born with an attribute that fits him or her for a particular social role, his or her 'proper' place.

Several features of the ancient world make sense against the background of these assumptions – its contempt for labour and distrust of commerce, its admiration for military valour and, not least, its conception of the universe or cosmos.

We have already seen that civic virtue or patriotism, unlimited





devotion to the welfare of the city, was accounted the highest virtue. Now the chief threat to civic virtue was deemed to be a taste for 'luxury', a taste that the development of money had no doubt fortified. The admirers of Sparta often attributed this taste to Athens and Corinth. In their view, luxury led inexorably to the corruption of a city. Luxury distracted citizens from their proper concern, which was the public weal. By indulging a taste for luxury, citizens were led instead into a preoccupation with wealth and its perquisites: consumption, display and pleasure. By contrast, Sparta was cited as the model for citizens living an austere common life, always ready to answer the call of duty, with weapons at hand. Spartans were stripped for action.

Doubtless there was more than a little propaganda in this view. But that did not make it any less influential, either at the time or later, when it became a stock-in-trade of the classical republican tradition. For this rhetoric captured an important aspect of thinking about the city-state. The growth of luxury represented a withdrawal into the domestic sphere, and a weakening of the citizens' public ardour, fostering instead a kind of self-indulgence and even effeminacy. And the latter quality was a symptom of the inferior nature of the domestic sphere.

Honour, rather than pleasure, ought to be the concern of the citizen. For honour or 'glory' was the public reward for virtue. Socrates dramatized the choice facing citizens when repeating the story of a debate between 'Vice' and 'Virtue' staged before the young Heracles. After Vice has offered the boy rapid access to happiness through pleasure, Virtue exclaims:

> What can you know of real pleasure . . . ? You fill yourself full of everything even before you feel the need. Before feeling hunger, you eat; before feeling thirst, you drink. In order that you may take pleasure in dining, you contrive the presence of chefs; in order that you may take pleasure in drinking, you equip yourself with expensive wines and rush about in search of snow in summer; and in order that you may take pleasure in sleeping, you provide yourself not only with soft bedding, but with a frame for your couch as well . . . You force sex before it is needed, contriving everything and using men in place of women. You train your friends, behaving arrogantly at night and sleeping through

> the most useful hours of the day. You never hear praise, the most pleasant of all things to hear; and you never see the most pleasant of all things to see: for nothing is more pleasant to see than one's own noble work.[4]

The admiration of other citizens – not to mention inferiors – was what mattered. And that admiration had to be won through single-minded devotion to the public weal. It was a goal that required clear thinking and self-control. The heroes in Thucydides' account of the war between Athens and Sparta (the Peloponnesian War, 431–404 BC) are the prototypes, making a contrast with the self-indulgent, aberrant behaviour of an anti-hero like the traitorous Alcibiades.

At the heart of this rhetoric was a simple contrast between masculine hardness and feminine softness. If the former was associated especially with the warrior citizens of Sparta and early Republican Rome, the latter was associated not only with the more pleasure-loving societies of Athens and Corinth but also, later, with Imperial Rome. Thus commerce became associated with 'giving in' to appetites – with refinements, sensual pleasures and a narcissism that subverted civic spirit. Commerce became the enemy of simplicity. It became almost a synonym for decadence. Commerce, along with the taste for luxury it promoted, turned men into quasi-women. Cicero, the orator and Roman moralist, liked to cite a saying by Archytas of Tarentum on the evils posed to the polis by luxury and sensuality: 'the greatest of these evils is that it predisposes men to unpatriotic acts'.[5]

The cult of the heroic male nude, who steadfastly resisted the lure of 'mere' appetites, served to complete the contrast between the qualities required for public life and the qualities fostered by the domestic sphere. For the citizen had to be prepared to be a warrior. He had not only to defend the territory and gods of his city, but also be ready to take part in any expeditions the assembly might decide upon. The Spartan warrior was always on call.

As we have seen, military expeditions against other cities were not judged on abstract grounds of justice. What alone mattered was the prospect of success. The king of Sparta, Archidamus, urged war against Athens in the following way: 'Remember, then, that you are marching against a very great city. Think, too, of the glory or, if events





turn out differently, the shame which you will bring to your ancestors and to yourselves, and, with all this in mind, follow your leaders, paying the strictest attention to discipline . . .'[6]

Apart from glory, the advantage to be gained by success was as much economic as political. For in antiquity there was no clear distinction between military and economic activity. How could there be? Part of the point of warfare and conquest was enslavement of the enemy. War was also the recruitment of labour. Little wonder, therefore, that labour was seen as dishonourable. It was associated with defeat and permanent social inferiority.

Inevitably, such radical status differences spilled over into judgements about the proper uses of the mind, that is, about rationality. The contrast between the 'noble' qualities of the citizen and the inferior skills of the merchant were a case in point. The grave reflection and persuasion that fostered knowledge of the public weal stood in sharp contrast to the bargaining and calculation of the marketplace. It was deemed demeaning for the citizen to use his mind in such a way. He had better things to do. (Is this why Romans regarded the enormous wealth accumulated by generals and governors in their service as 'inadvertent'?)

Of course, the faculty of speech and reason – logos – carried with it another possibility: disagreement. If men could disagree about how words were to be used in the most mundane, domestic matters, how much greater were the discords that might result from arguments in the assembly. At worst, appeals to the public good might simply cloak citizens' defence of partial interests, while the pursuit of honour might become the plaything of vanity, in what might be called the Alcibiades syndrome. When such things happened, the polis had become corrupt. The domestic sphere had come to overwhelm the public sphere, alone the sphere of nobility.

The danger of civil war always lurked in the background of public argument. For it could undermine the city entirely, leading to the destruction not just of the *urbs* but also of the *civitas*, the moral community or nexus of association. This extreme danger could take the form of one faction or class within the city appealing to another city for its intervention – a tactic that helped the neighbouring Macedonian kingdom gradually to subdue Greek cities. Such action amounted

to the renunciation or abandonment of logos, of rational argument in the assembly. It was the collective equivalent of the penalty of exile for particular citizens, because it plunged the city into a similarly strange world without norms, a world without family or civic gods whose aid could be counted on.

The threat that held the prospect of *stasis* or civil war at bay was the threat of conquest. The citizen class were necessarily also warriors, concerned to protect the independence of the city. That concern helped to unify factions. It turned the idea of the public weal or common good into a kind of glue. For, as we have seen, conquest could lead to enslavement, to sudden, total loss of that superior status which defined ancient citizenship.

For citizens, conquest involved not merely the loss of goods but of gods, of personal identity. It may be that what finally sweetened a bitter pill, the loss of complete autonomy for the city, was an overlordship which preserved the outward forms of civic independence and worship – and with them, the superior status of the citizen. Thus domination by Philip of Macedon and Alexander the Great, who had overcome the cities of the Greek heartland by the late fourth century BC, was preferable to slavery.

Just as previously inferior groups had acquiesced in tyranny within the city, in order to enter the citizen class and share in its privileges, that enlarged citizen class eventually sacrificed self-government – very reluctantly – to the preservation of its privileges. But, in consequence, its superior social status, which was deemed to incorporate a superior rationality, was forced to come to terms with a wider world and a more remote form of government. It has been argued that by the third and second century BC many Greeks welcomed the 'imperial' progress, first of Macedon and then of Rome, as a relief from the incessant social conflicts within their own cities.

This created a serious crisis of identity. For if the need to defend the independence of the polis had hitherto justified the primacy of the public sphere – underpinning the self-abandonment of citizens to the excitements of government and warfare – what could now prevent citizens retreating into the inferior pleasures of the domestic sphere? What could prevent them forfeiting the claims of rational superiority that had been central to their role and their self-respect?





With the decline of the polis, a whole conception of society and of the rational self was at risk.

For most citizens of Greek cities, 'law' and 'justice' had been identical. Participation in making the law helped to give citizens a sense that obeying the law was an imperious duty. It was at the core of a citizen's rightful pride. And it was cited to explain the Greeks' superiority over mere 'barbarians'. Herodotus tells the story of a deposed Spartan king, Demaratus, who took refuge at the Persian court of Xerxes. When the Persian king, planning his invasion of Greece, asked whether the Greeks would resist, given their very inferior numbers and the fact that they had no master to compel them to fight, Demaratus replied:

> They are free, yes, but not entirely free. For they have a master, and that master is Law, whom they fear even more than your subjects do you. Whatever this master commands, they do, and his command is always the same. He does not permit them to flee in battle, against whatever odds, but compels them to stand firm, conquer or die.[7]

The decline of the polis threatened to undermine such pride – and with it, the whole aristocratic model of society.

Little wonder that some philosophical movements, notably that of the Sophists, had already begun to speculate whether law or justice was anything more than the rule of the strongest. Both struggles within the citizen class and constant warfare between cities, culminating in the prolonged struggle between Athens and Sparta, had lent plausibility to their arguments. But such scepticism came up against impressive intellectual resistance. In the ancient world it was not only the conception of the self – of rationality and action – that carried the imprint of a highly stratified society. That imprint can also be detected in the conception of the universe or cosmos which prevailed in Greece and Rome.

After all, we should never forget that it was the Greeks who invented 'nature'. That is, they invented the concept that has had such a long and varied career, being turned to the uses of very different societies and cultures during two and a half millennia. In its original form, which the Romans accepted from the Greeks, the concept of nature was about as far removed from the nineteenth-century Darwinian

picture of nature 'red in tooth and claw' as it could be. It was originally a concept that conveyed a rational order or hierarchy of being. Everything had a fixed place in 'a great chain of being'.

The Greek conception of nature did not at first make any sharp distinction between nature (*physis*) and culture (*nomos*), between the cosmos and the social order. Instead, it presented the two as a single continuum. Binding them together was the assumption of natural inequality, the assumption that every being has a purpose or goal (*telos*), which fits it to occupy a particular place in the great chain of being. Only when tending towards that goal is it fulfilling its nature and contributing to the preordained harmony of things. To be fully rational was to be able to grasp this 'natural' order.

When the Greeks turned to speculating about the order of the heavens, these habits of thought came into play. Greeks projected their hierarchical vision onto the universe. That vision shaped their understanding of the heavens, an understanding elaborated by Aristotle and, later, turned into a sophisticated model by Ptolemy. Accepted by the Romans, the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos would not be seriously challenged until the late middle ages.

We can see the impact of this hierarchical vision in the way a difference of opinion among Greek thinkers about the cosmos was resolved. One of the first cosmologists, Aristarchus, had placed the sun at the centre of things, with the earth orbiting around it. Yet the very idea of the earth moving around the sun proved uncongenial to the Greek mind. How could their stable, 'rational' hierarchy be founded on movement? So a rival model was increasingly preferred, which placed the earth at the centre of things, surrounded by eternal and incorruptible heavens.[8]

In that way the assumption of natural inequality shaped the Greeks' understanding of the planets as well as the stars. For them, these were 'heavenly' bodies in more than one sense. That is, they encircled the earth in a series of ever-larger crystalline spheres, with the outer and 'higher spheres' of the stars beyond the inner and lower planetary spheres. The more distant the sphere, the purer and more spiritual it was assumed to be. Aristotle assigned a separate intelligence to each of the spheres. The moon, so close to the earth, was the





least refined of the heavenly bodies – the lowest in intelligence. The most remote stars of the final sphere represented the most refined intelligence and controlled the others. 'Ancient thinkers were alternately inspired and oppressed by a vertiginous upward view. As they stepped out under the night sky, they thought of themselves as looking upward at layer after layer of vibrant beings, each more glorious than the last, each very different from their heavy selves.'[9] Distrust of matter informed this view of things celestial. The visible cosmos was represented as a spiritual ascent, by analogy with the assumption that the mind should govern the body, which was, after all, mere 'base matter'.

Despite the constraints imposed by these hierarchical assumptions, Greek cosmologists and Ptolemy did display extraordinary ingenuity in charting the movements of 'heavenly' bodies without the aid of telescopes. Drawing on Babylonian sources and developing sophisticated mathematical techniques, the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos accounted for much of what could be seen with the naked eye, making it possible for the ancients to predict eclipses and solstices. Yet what we would call physical events continued to be seen by them as signs or 'auspices' – signals revealing the will of the gods. Thunder and lightning, the movements of birds, the behaviour of an animal when released from its cage – all of these 'portents' could influence decision-making in the ancient polis. Despite the emergence of more abstract thought, nature remained full of purpose for the Greeks and Romans. Divination was the art of identifying those purposes. While the Greeks appealed to oracles as well as omens, the Romans had 'a doggedly enduring faith in the predictive power of astrology'.

So even the powers of abstraction, whether in the form of mathematics or philosophy, appeared to confirm the claims of rational superiority through the imagery of ascent. It is no surprise that Plato's so-called 'Neoplatonic' followers relied so much on that imagery. By definition, the superior mind was able to disentangle itself from 'base' matter, enabling it to hear 'the music of the heavenly spheres', a trait which, for Plato, created the philosopher-king's right to rule.

The Sophists, however, began to challenge this view of things. They

were a fascinating group. They were the first professional teachers or intellectuals, that is, they were paid for their services – which immediately brought them up against a deep prejudice in a residually aristocratic society. Even more importantly, perhaps, the Sophists, who often came from small cities and modest backgrounds, wandered from city to city. They were not citizens anywhere, which placed them outside the sphere of morality in the eyes of traditional Greeks. Sophists were literally 'amoral', because they did not belong to the moral world of any polis. Even the way they taught seemed to undermine their claims to teach the skills required by citizenship. For they prided themselves on being able to show, with equal ease, how to defend or refute successfully any particular proposition.[10]

When Socrates argues with Protagoras, the leading Sophist, it is clear that he greatly respects Protagoras' dialectical skills. The Sophists had begun to distinguish 'nature' from 'convention'. Often they made the two antithetical. Yet they did not pursue a single strategy. Some might champion what existed 'by nature' – brute rule of the strongest, for example – while others defended what existed by 'convention' or custom, unwritten moral rules on which, it was claimed, positive law depended. But whatever strategy they pursued, the Sophists fostered habits of thought which disturbed the assumption that nature and culture belonged to a single moral continuum, a hierarchical order in which the gods lay behind the laws on which society was founded. In this way they encouraged a kind of scepticism.

Was reason really the anointed instrument of moral and social order? Or did the claim that reason can and should rule merely mask the role of appetites, vanity and mere force in human affairs? Did reason provide not a privileged access to the nature of things but rather a means of manipulation? Whether the Sophists intended it or not, such questions began to be asked. For the Sophists' approach raised doubts about a teleological understanding of the world.

To be sure, the Sophists met powerful philosophical opposition. Responding to 'sophistry', Plato and Aristotle sought to place social and political argument once again within the framework of a world order defined by purpose or *telos*. Anxious about the future of citizenship in the polis – for Aristotle 'the only life worth living' – their





efforts restored teleology to a dominant position. Whether it was Plato's mathematically inspired forms, or Aristotle's typology of causes, rational understanding was the crux. Such knowledge was presented not only as a necessary but also a sufficient condition for achieving harmony – for identifying and conforming to the rational order or logos behind the material world of sensations and shifting appearances. Knowledge of goals was the key to both natural and social order.

This defence of teleology enabled philosophers to see themselves as the vanguard of a superior class, the class of citizens. For a long time their concerns remained tied to the concerns of the polis, to fostering the skills of the citizen. As we have seen, the idea of logos or rational order was fused with the idea of public speaking and with the vocation of the citizen. Even when the persistent asking of questions and pursuit of rational conclusions stirred unease in the city – and might lead, as in the case of Socrates, to charges of subversion – a case could still be made that fostering self-awareness gave a city such as Athens an important competitive advantage, an advantage in knowledge and therefore power. For just as thought and action were fused in the Greek mind, so were knowledge and skill. In the fifth century BC, the astonishing defeat of the Persians by the Greeks and the growth of the Athenian empire had seemed a vindication of such associations of ideas. Yet in the following centuries these near certainties were shaken.

The idea of logos had shaped Greek understanding of law as well as the cosmos. The original sanction of the gods of the city gradually took refuge in the idea of logos. But if debates in city assemblies promoted abstract argument at the expense of domestic worships and civic gods, the weakening of the Greek city-states after the Peloponnesian War and the rise of Macedonian power – reducing formerly proud city-states almost to colonies – gave the idea of logos an even more powerful impetus. The logos which had been embodied in the city and its laws began to make way for a logos embodied in a universal rational order, in what would be called 'natural law'.

Observing the shift of power from cities to large military empires had an important effect on minds. The new scale of social organization

could not be ignored. The centralizing of power at the expense of local autonomy led philosophers to question assumptions that had previously sustained the life of the polis. Was the life of the citizen really the only life worth living? Was the virtually complete hold of civic life over body and soul justified when the city had ceased to be autonomous and self-governing? Was it really 'idiotic' not to be totally immersed in the life of the polis?

In the Hellenistic period – following the apogee of the city-state – philosophers began to speculate about a universal or 'human' nature that underlay different social conventions. Yet their speculations were directed especially at demonstrating their rational superiority, an ability to rise above the local and parochial. To that extent, it was a reassertion of the assumption of natural inequality which had for so long sustained a hierarchical conception of society. These philosophers' speculations did not have any radical moral import. They were not subversive. They were not designed to challenge or undermine the 'aristocratic' beliefs and practices of the ancient world, though the weakening of the city-state and the advent of large empires, first the Macedonian and then the Roman, no doubt influenced them.

Aristocratic assumptions about the proper ordering of society began to take refuge in a larger world. That is the strategy – irresistible in its way – that can be detected within newer philosophical movements such as Stoicism. In its austere message of self-control, Stoicism brought to a new height the assumption that reason can and should govern, with the passions entirely subjugated to reason. The model of motivation Stoics relied upon still bore the impress of a superior class commanding subordinate social forces. Becoming a 'citizen of the world' offered a new form of privilege, even if it was the privilege of renunciation, withdrawal and contemplation rather than of civic participation. It rested on the same postulate of rationality that had set citizens of the cities apart from their inferiors, a postulate that preserved a sense of superiority and provided a citadel for pride when the walls of the city had been breached.

Such a refuge exacted a high price, however. It divorced social superiority from observable local power. It weakened the hold of the





citizen class, previously religious, military and theatrical, over their inferiors. For during the Hellenistic period the splendid monuments, buildings and games sponsored by civic notables – as in Alexandria, the city founded as a memorial to Alexander the Great – could not entirely conceal the loss of self-government. Are we to suppose that their inferiors did not notice?