



## Greek Humanism: For and Against

Humanism involves a heightened awareness of human potential, a belief that man is the measure of all things. To what degree was this view held by the ancient Greeks?

Humanist, now, no longer equals the humanities (practically identified with literature), though Bloom's call for a return to ancient Greek humanism might suggest the equation. Humanism, whether secular or Christian, focuses on man's life here on earth, his role in the universe, and ethical matters.

The notion that men can become gods derives, according to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*, from the Ancient Near East/African culture, especially Egyptian, stolen by the Greeks. But the Greeks were famous as analytic thinkers, and ancient Egyptian philosophers, if they existed, are now lost to us entirely (along with any dramatists or historians they may have had.) Egyptian art is often called cold and monumental, in contrast to Greek art, where the emphasis is on the human body.

Erasmus and Petrarch both looked to the Greeks and Romans as precursors to Christianity, (Socrates was St. Socrates to the Renaissance), and modern notions of Greco-Roman humanism come from/through the Renaissance. But what did the Greeks actually believe about the role and potential of mankind?

Homer's *Odyssey* features praise of domestic life (as the hero strives to reach home and wife), in contrast with the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh, where the emphasis is on the hero's search for immortality (which Odysseus refuses to take from Calypso). Woody Allen's statement, "I don't want to live on in the hearts and minds of my countrymen; I'd much rather live on in my apartment." may apply here.

Hesiod, on the other hand, in his parable of the five metallic ages and the progressive degeneration of man, shows his feeling that the world is so wicked that it deserves to be wiped out. When Pandora opens her jar/box and all the evils rushed out into the world, hope alone is left behind, but is it positive or negative that hope is locked up? Prometheus may have been a hero of human intelligence, but the Greeks show that Prometheus tries to help man but can't overwhelm Zeus.

Xenophanes remarks that "If cattle and horses had hands, they'd draw gods as cattle and horses,... but God is unlike humans...all mind". But does such a God put man at the center of things? Probably not.

In the case of the Greek oracles, men listened to the advice of (generally) Apollo, as did Themistocles in 480 about the wooden walls that would save Athens from the Persians. But he had to interpret the oracle: Athenian navy, not walls around the Acropolis. Human intelligence may work out the best course for men, but the oracles are always right; it's just a matter of figuring out what the oracle means.

Sophocles wrote *Oedipus the King* in the great age of Greek humanism, the time of the Sophists, like Protagoras, a religious agnostic and well-placed friend of Pericles. Protagoras said he didn't know about the existence of gods, so he was branded an atheist and his books burned. Greek tragedy questioned some of these concepts and, in *Oedipus*, Jocasta scorns the oracles, disturbing the chorus, who feared the oracles might be proven untrue. The action of the play vindicated the truth of the oracles, as against free thought. *Oedipus* was the quintessential questioner, but he was fated to kill his father and marry his mother, so he could not avoid it. What then is man's place in the universe if *Oedipus* = Everyman? Freedom consists of knowing your fate - or your human limitations. In *Oedipus*, the physician turns out to be the plague.

Socrates and Plato were anti-scientific, turning to the study of morality. True reality lay in the realm of the gods, who were the true measure of all things. Yet Socrates was executed as an atheist (= anyone who didn't believe in the traditional state gods).

In sum, the Greeks were profoundly pious but pessimistic about man's role in the universe. Thucydides sees the disaster of men taking control of their own destinies. The Greeks supported slavery, infanticide, war, magic -- not what we normally consider humanistic. The Greeks believed in human limits.

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