The Impact of Greek Philosophy on Early Western Civilization

Both philosophy and religion have played prominent roles within western civilization. While religion can be viewed as a unifying force at work throughout almost all periods of western civilization, it is rational thought, stemming from philosophy and subsequent derivational sciences, which has allowed man to gain greater insight and understanding of his world. The relationship between philosophy and science might best be understood through analogy. Philosophy could be viewed as a large house with many rooms, each having been occupied at one time by a particular field of science. It is difficult to discern the exact point at which a field of science leaves home and establishes its own domicile, and the problem is compounded when examining certain early philosophers such as Aristotle who had such a diverse repertoire.

While both religious and rational frames of reference have coincided at various times as alternate views of man’s world and his place within, they have not always been viewed as being compatible.

Philosophy could be viewed as an alternative building material to religion and mythology; it is mankind’s desire to construct his worldview with a more elaborative and self-supporting infrastructure.

The historical periods within early western civilization’s history in which rational thought has played a prominent role in shaping man’s world-view can be distinguished not only on the basis of intellectual achievement, but also on the state of existence afforded to individuals within that time frame. These instances are easily discernable from those that lack rational examination and rely solely on religious, mythological, or supernatural references for the basis for man’s world-view. When the majority of individuals within a given society construct their world-view based primarily on rational

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2 The term ‘world-view’ used throughout this paper is best defined by calquing the German word Weltanschauung. Merriam-Webster: Etymology: German, from Welt world + Anschauung view. “A comprehensive conception or apprehension of the world especially from a specific standpoint.”
thought, the individual quality of life improves. While the exact point at which man begins to replace supernatural explanation with rational analysis is difficult to define, the Greek Hellenic age provides the most significant examples of man’s shift towards rational contemplation and introspection within early western civilization.

Religion, as a unifying force, has at times subordinated the individual and his or her needs to that of the state and/or ruler(s) thereof. In some periods of history, it has even stripped the individual of any motivation but for that of the attainment of salvation and a place in an afterlife. The net effect is usually manifested in a way such that primary consideration is given to the practice of religion itself, even at the cost of a detrimental or bleak existence for the practitioner.

However, it is not always the case that philosophy and religion are viewed as completely separate and incompatible building materials within man’s architectural blueprint of reality. To the contrary, these methods of understanding have been employed at various times as complimentary ways in which man attempts to reconcile his world-view, including proof of the existence of God. Even when co-existing with varying degrees of acceptance as an alternate view to that of religion, philosophy’s overall effect propels certain periods of western civilization to greater heights of achievement and an improved state of existence. It is the purpose of this paper then to survey the role of Greek philosophy and thought in shaping early western civilization, beginning prior to the Greek Hellenic period, and concluding with attempts to reconcile philosophy with religion, primarily during the High medieval period.

**Pre-Philosophical Civilization: Mythology and Religion**

Since the beginning of recorded history, man has sought methods of explaining the world in which he lives. Early on, the primary means of understanding his relationship with the forces of nature resulted in the creation of various mythologies. As civilization began to emerge along the Tigris-Euphrates and the Nile, mythology was superseded by a more elaborate and structured mode of viewing the world and man’s place within:

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3 In regards to proving the existence of God, or of any higher power at work throughout man’s universe, philosophers and religious theoreticians utilize analytic arguments based on *a priori* knowledge (that which is derived from rational thought and independent of experience), and are referred to as ontological arguments.
religion. The polytheistic religions that developed in Sumaria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and elsewhere in the Near and Middle East retained certain aspects of their mythological antecedents; in many cases the supernatural elements thought to be at work in nature were simply replaced with anthropomorphic deities. While the explanations for the natural world that these various religions provided were far from rational, their acceptance might be considered as an indicator of the daily struggle for life that permeated early civilized man’s existence. A contributing factor that shaped both daily life and religion was the environment in which these early cultures lived. Environmental conditions had tremendous physical and psychological ramifications for many cultures in the Near and Middle East. Some climates, such as that of Tigris-Euphrates, were harsh, unpredictable, and unforgiving. As a result, the religions (and their associated pantheon of deities) mirrored these conditions of existence, and added pervasive tones of fatalism and pessimism to man’s purpose and direction. Unlike their hunter-gatherer forbearers, the people of these early cultures were also under a more pronounced authority stemming from the marriage of statecraft and religion. Man’s purpose was simple: to serve out his life at the behest of the gods as directed by their earthly representatives in the form of the ruling class and priests. By today’s standards, his life was hard and bleak, and offered little or no time to spend contemplating anything other than his immediate needs. Even the thought of reward after life was unknown to most religions of the time, with the major exception being that of Egypt. While there can be no doubt that these early periods were instrumental in raising man to a civilized state of existence, the individual and his or her needs were of secondary importance to that of the collective in which they were a part. Religion during these early periods provided a cohesive effect, allowing for great achievements to be made by unifying man into labor and military forces within a given empire or state. However, the individual’s benefit for service was disproportionate to that of the ruling class. Furthermore, while there was significant progress made in many intellectual areas, this progress was relatively slow when compared to later periods such as the Greek Hellenic Age (800 BCE – 323 BCE). The explanation for this disparity may lay in the world-view these early near-eastern civilizations adopted. A synopsis offered by Perry et al. states “The civilizations of the ancient Near East were based on a way of thinking fundamentally different from modern scientific outlook. The difference between
scientific and mythical thinking is profound…The mythmaking mind of the Near East saw every object in nature as a *thou* – personified, alive, with an individual will” (29). This world-view suppressed rational thought in such a way as to limit the progress of intellectual achievements: “Of course, Near Eastern people did engage in rational forms of thought and behavior…However, because rational or logical thought remained subordinate to a mythic-religious orientation, they did not arrive at a consistently and self-consciously rational method of inquiring into physical nature and human culture” (Perry et al., p.30).

**The Supplanting of Religious / Mythopoeic World-Views with Rational Thought**

As civilization spread to the opposite side of Mediterranean Sea into Greece, a new means of explaining the world and man’s place within it began to emerge. Through the use of rational reflection, early philosophers attempted to construct a world-view that set aside religion and supernatural explanations of phenomena. Even though religious thoughts and practices were retained, Man came to view himself as a creature capable of rational thought, able to perceive both the abstract and concrete facets of his world in such a way that demanded an accounting which religion alone could not provide. While civic religion still continued during this period, it did not dominate all aspects of Man’s life: “Every aspect of Greek civilization – science, philosophy, art, literature, politics, historical writings – showed a growing reliance on human reason and a diminishing dependency on the gods” (Perry et al., p.99). Early philosophers proposed explanations of natural phenomena that were independent of either mythological or theological properties. Although there can be no certainty concerning the first person(s) to adopt this new mode of thought, it is usually agreed that the first recorded are the Milesian (Ionian) philosophers who lived around 600 BC, beginning with Thales⁴, and including Anaximander and Anaximenes (Soccio, 2006, p.). After the Ionian philosophers came Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Zeno of Elea, and many others that added to the ever-expanding base of philosophical inquiry and scientific knowledge that the Greeks

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⁴ The extent to which these early philosophers began to rely on rational thought as a means by which they interpreted the world around them is anecdotally recounted in a story concerning Thales and his prediction of an olive harvest. Thales used empirical observations of weather to deduce that a given olive harvest would be bountiful and, before harvest season occurred, purchased all of the olive presses in within the region that he lived. His prediction came to pass, placing him in the financially lucrative situation of the sole owner of olive presses by which olive oil is extracted.
and their heirs would later draw from. Next would come the Sophists, whose ranks include Protagoras. His famous quote that “man is the measure of all things” summarized not only the Sophist view of relativism and the subjectivity of truth, but also defines the attitude that Man, the individual, has now become significant. Perhaps what might be considered the pinnacle of Greek philosophical thought was to occur approximately 150 years after the Ionian philosophers with Socrates, his student Plato, and Aristotle (who was Plato’s student). The written works of the latter two, Plato and Aristotle, would have a far reaching impact on western civilization, including the Christian religion of the medieval period discussed later in this paper.

The aggregate effect of the world-view based on rational thought, which the Greek philosophers provided, was a culture within which the individual became master of his own destiny. The citizen of this society had control of all aspects concerning his being. Ethical freedom (espoused by Socrates) coupled with civic and political freedom (examined by both Plato and Aristotle) became attainable during the Greek Hellenic Age. These freedoms culminated in a humanistic attitude, wherein the individual took center stage, and was encouraged to attain the highest levels of development and excellence. This humanistic view motivated Greek culture towards great achievements in all pursuits. Art, music, architecture, and literature flourished as a result of this rational world-view. Greek historians offered accounts that were free of mythical, supernatural, and religious overtones. Poetry and drama depicted Man as an individual of worth. This is in stark contrast to Near and Middle Eastern civilizations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt, wherein “people had no clear conception of their individual worth and no understanding of political liberty. They were not citizens, but subjects who marched to the command of a ruler whose power originated with the Gods” (Perry et al., p. 99). Perhaps the crowning achievement of this rational world-view and humanistic attitude was its remarkable endurance over the course of nearly half a millennium, including the Hellenistic Age (323 BCE – 30 BCE) and most of the Greco-Roman Age (30 BCE – 470 CE). Throughout these periods, religion was still an important part of many societies in the west, but can generally be viewed as a secondary factor contributing to the framework through which individuals interpreted and interacted with their world.
The Shift From Rational to Spiritual Thought

The change from a rational to a religious frame of reference for western Man’s worldview is apparent towards the end of the Greco-Roman period. Several causal factors contributed to this shift, including the spread of Eastern mystery religions and the rise of Neo-Platonism after the death of Marcus Aurelius (Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher). Furthermore, Christianity began its ascent as the predominant religion throughout the western world towards the end of the Roman Empire. After a long period of persecution under Roman authority, Emperor Constantine granted Christians toleration by way of the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313. Christianity had become the state religion by order of Theodosius I in A.D. 392 (Perry et al., p. 182). However, even with the imminent collapse of the Roman Empire, and the move towards a spiritual world-view, the lure of rational thought contained within Greek philosophy still held sway on many, including influential Christian theoreticians such as Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.).

While Augustine is noted as “the chief architect of the Christian outlook that succeeded a dying classicism.” (Perry et al., p. 189), it is important to note his background before becoming a true Christian. While attending school in Carthage, he had become a member of the Manicheans, who claimed to have reconciled religion with philosophy. He was an established rhetorician Carthage, and later Milan, and was well versed in various Neo-Platonic works. It wasn’t until 386 C.E., after having discarded Manichaeism shortly before, that he converted to Christianity. To summarize, he had been highly influenced by, and had a large degree of understanding about classical philosophy before becoming a Christian theoretician. It is little wonder then that one of his greatest contributions to both philosophy and religion came about in an attempt to reconcile the two in his thoughts and writings. The expression ‘natural theology’ (theologia naturalis) which may have first been used by the Roman scholar Varro, was adopted by Augustine of Hippo in De civitate Dei, wherein he argued that the Christian doctrine of monotheism was consistent with Greek philosophy (St. Augustine, 1952). His legacy would influence many theologians and philosophers afterwards, including Boethius, John Duns Scotus, Anselm.

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5 Neo-Platonism is usually regarded as a religious philosophy, a mystical form of Platonism.
6 This information is included in the biographical notes preceding the Marcus Dods translation of The City of God, within Great Books of the Western World, Vol. 18. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.
of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas. On the same day in 430 C.E. at Hippo, St. Augustine died while the Vandals were burning the city (Palmer, p.99). He is remembered as one of the most important developers of Western Christianity, and for his contribution towards reconciling religion with philosophy.

Several factors can be attributed to the loss of Greek philosophical thought within western civilization after the end of the Greco-Roman period. A drastic decrease in literacy, an almost complete loss of the Greek language, and the loss of classical works contributed significantly. Schools founded during the Greco-Roman era were closed. Perhaps one of the last students to be educated at the Platonic Academy in Athens before the Emperor Justinian closed it was the scholar Boethius. His last and most important work, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, was written while in prison awaiting execution. Boethius and his masterpiece symbolize the last vestige of a worldview shaped by Greek philosophy: rather than turning to religion for comfort during his final days, he instead chose philosophy. His work survived as almost the sole connection that Latin Christendom had to the ancient Greeks (Aristotle in particular) and their philosophical and scientific thoughts until the twelfth century (Perry et al., p.213). A handful of other scholars contributed to the preservation of Greek learning during the 5th and 6th centuries, including Cassiodorus, who initiated monastic transcribing and copying of ancient texts (Perry et al., p.213).

**Preservation of Greek Thought by Eastern Civilizations**

During the interregnum between the collapse of the Greco-Roman world and the Renaissance, the people of Europe suffered from a decline in cultural stability and intellectual aptitude. While the Christian religion did manage to keep certain areas unified spiritually, the fragmentation of the religion itself as a result of the first Great Schism between Latin Christendom and Greek Orthodox severed the transmission of knowledge from the Byzantine Empire, which had retained and preserved much of Greek philosophy’s gifts. Throughout the early Middle Ages (500 – 1050), Byzantine civilization enjoyed a more advanced state of existence than that of the west, both economically and culturally: “At a time when few westerners (Latin Christians) could read or write, Byzantine scholars studied the literature, philosophy, science, and law of ancient Greece and Rome.” (Perry et al., p. 199). During the eighth and ninth century, the
Muslim world also came into a golden age. They had acquired Greek learning from both Byzantium and Persia, and made contributions of their own. Muslim scholars, including Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina (Avicenna) plumbed the depths of Aristotelian logic and contributed their own commentaries, which would be passed on to the west and examined during the Middle Ages. The great Muslim philosopher Averroës examined the distinction between systems of knowledge (reason versus revelation) during the Middle Ages while attempting to reconcile the contradictions between Aristotelian philosophy and revealed religion within the Muslim religion. His commentaries on Aristotle earned him the moniker of “the Commentator”, and would be influential as well on Muslim, Jewish, and Christian philosophers afterwards (Perry et al., p.208). Other non-western scholars, such as Maimonides (a Jewish Rabbi, physician, and philosopher), would inherit, contribute to, and transmit Greek thought. Maimonides produced the great Dalalat al-ha`irin: The Guide of the Perplexed, in which Jewish theology and Greek philosophy are compared and contrasted.

Perhaps one of the largest debts of gratitude that western civilization owes to that of Byzantium and the Eastern cultures is the preservation of Greek thought and science. While it could be argued that the role Byzantium played in blocking the Muslim conquest of the west is far more significant, it can also be seen that the Byzantine Empire acted as a waypoint for the preservation and transmission of Greek learning. It is also true that the Muslim world played no small part in preserving and contributing to that legacy. In regards to the state of existence and intellectualism between western and eastern peoples during the interregnum discussed above, while the former (western) cultures struggled to re-emerge from a dark, barbaric state, the latter (eastern) cultures enjoyed a rather advanced and prosperous form.

The Reconciliation of Religion and Greek Philosophy
As Europe began to emerge from the Early Middle Ages, a renewed interest in scholastic pursuits issued forth as well. Contact with the East was re-established through a variety of channels, including the Italian merchants who conducted trade throughout the eastern Mediterranean. Muslim and Byzantine learning found inroads to the west through Spain and Sicily. By the time of the High Middle Ages, many ancient texts had been translated from Greek and Arabic into Latin, propelling the rediscovery of Greek thought in the
west. The Christian Church, re-invigorated and at waxing high in its role as arbitrator and unifier of western lands, revitalized both the need and the means for learning. In 1077, Anselm of Canterbury reopened the quest for a reconciliation of classical Greek thought and Christian doctrine when he began writing the *Proslogion*. Anselm would also become the abbot of the Benedictine Abbey of Bec\(^7\) in 1078, and is widely regarded as the first scholarly philosopher of Christian theology\(^8\). Within the *Proslogion*, Anselm offers the first western version of the ontological argument. In 1267, St. Thomas Aquinas began writing his famous treatise on the relationship of faith and reason, the *Summa Theologica*. Although the Bishop of Paris condemned Aquinas’ work at one point in 1277, that condemnation had the opposite effect of leading to a critical examination of Aristotelianism by many scholars of that time (Perry et al., p.270). By the time of the High Middle Ages, with the renewed interest in philosophy and science, and the rediscovery of ancient Greek works, Western civilization began to excel both culturally and intellectually. Great scholars such as Roger Bacon contributed to western Man’s understanding of the world through science. Literature produced during this period mirrors the common world-view wherein faith and reason intertwine. Towards the latter half of this period however, Christian faith and the power of the church begins to ebb. Some begin to question Christian doctrine, especially so in the works of Dante Alighieri. In an introduction to *La Divina Commedia*, Paolo Milano offers this observation as to Dante’s view of faith and reason: “…Dante was a Catholic who enthroned his Beloved in the Empyrean at the side of God, who called the church of his time the Harlot of Kings, and who prepared for a living Pope (“The Prince of the new Pharisees”) a seat in Hell. They (who do not understand Dante) pass over Dante’s genuine reverence for knowledge and science” (Alighieri, p. xxxix). Although western civilization would experience another period of adversity towards the end of the late Middle Ages, including the various crisis within Christianity including the breakdown of Thomistic synthesis and the second Great Schism, the gift of Greek thought had been entrenched firmly within

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\(^7\) Bec Abbey, founded in 1039 by the Norman knight Herluin, was widely considered a principal center of intellectual life in the 11\(^{th}\) century. Other notable persons having resided at Bec at one time include Lafranc of Pavia, Theobald of Bec, and Pope Alexander II.

\(^8\) Although proper homage should be paid to Johannes Scotus Eriugena (c. 815-877), an Irish theologian, Neo-Platonic philosopher, and poet who helped bridge the gap of intellectual and theological contributions between Boethius and Anselm (Palmer, p.106).
western civilization from this point onward. Eventually, beginning with the Italian Renaissance of the 15th century, western Man would adopt a worldview that allowed for both reason and faith, with the former having a more pronounced status.

**Conclusion**

The influence of Greek thought on western civilization as been tremendous. During the formative period of Greek philosophy and science, the adoption of a worldview which placed Man as the central important figure led to the development of the Greek culture whose legacy has been passed down over the centuries. Those civilizations and cultures that have safeguarded Greek learning and wisdom throughout time have benefited from their exertions, and have made it possible for other cultures to rediscover and enjoy those benefits. While the rational component of Greek thought has conflicted with the religious doctrines of many faiths, attempts at reconciliation have been made so that Man might benefit from both a rational worldview and a spiritual peace borne from the assurance that God exists. It has been the misfortune of western civilization to lose contact with Greek learning, the results of which forced an overdependence on religion to compensate for that loss. During these times, intellectual stagnation occurred, along with a decrease in the quality of existence for the individuals concerned. While both faith and reason can be viewed as forces at work within civilization, it is often the case that the latter is turned into a tool of power that is wielded only by a select few. Conversely, reason is a tool that empowers civilizations to accomplish great achievements enjoyed by all within. It is also a tool whose usage has often been mediated by religion, at times freely accepted and at other times disdained. Whether coexistent or independent of religion, Greek philosophy and thought allowed early western civilization to make significant strides towards a culture wherein the individual enjoys an elevated state of being.
Bibliography


Timeline of Writings

c. 400: St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) – Confessions (c. 400), City of God (413-426)
c. 524: Boethius (c.475-524) – Consolatio Philosophiae (The Consolation of Philosophy)

1077: Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) – Beginning of Proslogion

c. 1180: Averroes / Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) - Tahafut Al-Tahafut (precise date unknown)
c. 1185: Moses Maimonides (1120-1190) - The Guide of the Perplexed (precise date unknown)

1267: St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) – Beginning of Summa Theologica

c. 1306: John Duns Scotus (c. 1266-1308) - Tractatus de Primo Principio (precise date unknown)
c. 1321: Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321) – La Divina Commedia (written between c. 1308-1321)