Humanism in Ancient Greece and Rome

The roots of humanism reach back into ancient times. In ancient Greece, especially, philosophers explored many ideas we now recognize as humanistic.

Many Greeks were interested in looking for natural explanations of phenomena that had long been believed to be miraculous. The earliest we know of was Anaximander (611?-547? B.C.E.), who cast aside mythical creation stories by suggesting a theory of evolution in which animals originated in a moist environment and humans evolved from fish. Thales (640?-546? B.C.E.) developed an experimental approach to study static electricity, demonstrate that air is matter, and predict an eclipse of the sun.

Hippocrates (460?-377? B.C.E.), developed a system of medicine based on observation rather than superstition. He had not use for the temple hospitals controlled by the priests of Asclepius, god of healing.

The greatest experimental scientist of the ancient Mediterranean was Archimedes (287?-212 B.C.E), who developed basic mechanical mathematics.

Most Greek scholars were not so careful to perform experiments before reaching conclusions. For example, Democritus (460?-370? B.C.E.) declared that matter is made from atoms, but offered no proof. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) wrote books answering all the questions he could think of, but he was wrong as often as right.

Another subject favored by Greek philosophers was ethics. Many ethical systems were proposed, some humanistic, others not. The most famous philosopher, Socrates (469?-399 B.C.E.), believed optimistically that "No man knowingly does evil." Morality then is only a problem of knowing what is right. This seems naive, but it does suggest the humanistic principle that morality can be improved by education.

Socrates' pupil, Plato (427?-347? B.C.E.), was the least humanistic. His idea of morality was loyalty to a political system that resembled modern fascism. He also taught that souls were reincarnated after being punished for their sins in Hell between lives. Plato viewed the world of objects as a corruption of an ideal world of forms. Plato's ideas were popular with early Christian philosophers and contributed to some of the darker aspects of Christian orthodoxy.

Aristotle defined virtue as the "golden mean" between immoral extremes. For example, the virtue of generosity lies between the vices of stinginess and wastefulness.

Strato of Lampsacus, second in line to Aristotle at the Lyceum, stated that

the existence and fundamental laws of the universe explain all but cannot themselves be explained. God as the unexplained explainer is not needed. Pierre Bayle later called this "Stratonician atheism".

Most Greek philosophers agreed with Socrates that virtue produces happiness, but there was wide disagreement about which was more important, virtue or happiness. Those who favored virtue tended to develop systems like Plato's in which duty to the state was paramount and individual welfare was not very important. In contrast, Democritus advocated a rather humanistic ethical system emphasizing common sense and well-being based on cheerfulness, freedom from worry, and avoiding excess.

The most popular of the "virtue" philosophies was Stoicism, founded by Zeno (335?-265? B.C.E.). Zeno taught that a divine intelligence governs the world, and that we should not worry about events we cannot control. Happiness is achieved by following reason and freeing ourselves from passions. The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), a famous Stoic, wrote that he hated warfare but felt bound to lead the Roman armies because it was his duty.

One humanistic idea that the Stoics shared was cosmopolitanism; they viewed people as citizens of the world rather than of single nations only.

In competition with Stoicism was the most humanistic of all the ancient philosophies, Epicureanism. Epicurus (342?-270 B.C.) taught that the goal of life is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. This has often been misinterpreted as hedonism, or the pursuit of only carnal pleasures. But Epicurus wisely defined pleasure to include the joys of education, generosity, and especially friendship. Epicureans prudently avoid small pleasures that lead to future pain, and cultivate the virtues of moderation, courage, and justice.

Epicurus attempted to free humanity from fears of death and deities. He conceded that gods exist but relegated them to a far off paradise where they were not concerned with human affairs, which would be too painful for them. He denied any afterlife, saying, "When we are, death is not; and when death is, we are not."

The most famous disciple of Epicurus was the Roman writer, Lucretius (94?-55 B.C.). Like Epicurus, Lucretius believed that death is complete extinction and that the world is without divine design or rule. His major work was a six book poem entitled "De Rerum Natura" ("On the Nature of Things"). Lucretius tried to show that miracles are not necessary because everything has a natural cause. His amusing "scientific" explanations were usually mistaken, but the rediscovery of his book centuries later helped spark renewed interest in science and ethics during

the Renaissance.

At the dawn of the Christian era, with Roman power at its zenith, the ancient philosophers had made great strides in science and had developed many of the ideas we recognize as humanism. But the Empire gradually decayed and crumbled, and Christian fanatics took power. Non-Christian philosophies were branded as "pagan" and targeted for destruction along with the old "false gods".

Lucian (120?-200? C.E.), a Greek playwright of the Imperial court, included Christians among the targets of his satire.

In about 380 C.E. a Christian mob burned most of the Library of Alexandria, the great repository of ancient science, history, and literature. A few years later another mob brutally murdered Hypatia, a notable woman mathematician serving as one of the last librarians. The memory of Hypatia as a humanist martyr was resurrected by British secularists in the nineteenth century.