

The transition from Ancient Greece to the modern western world: Science, Values and the obstacle of Rome

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ABSTRACT

The transition from Ancient Greece to the modern western world does not take place through an unimpeded transfer of the scientific and philosophical views. Although there are frequent references to the “Greco-Roman” civilization, it is the partial but strong differentiations between Greece and Rome which did not allow the assimilation of Greek philosophy and science in the West under the right historical spirit, but rather transformed the Greek rationalism to a mere cause for that which, centuries later, the Spanish existentialist Ortega y Gasset would call “instrumental reason” [razón instrumental], that is the reason which does not take into consideration the metaphysical, ontological and psychological constituents of the human being, but the usefulness, applicability and potentiality of practical reason. While in Ancient Greece, right reason is rendered necessary for a life of eudaimonia and freedom, guiding teleologically to the self-realization of each individual and citizen –therefore having to do with the objective goal of human life-, gradually in Rome and the western world that emerges later and which is configured cataclysmically by the roman views, it comprises the means, nothing more than a common quid pro quo.

In the Roman Empire, despite the ongoing achievements of the Hellenistic Era, there prevails the inclination to preserve the acquired knowledge, which is still accrued principally within the Greek populations, rather than to expand it. The main transition of this knowledge, for those Roman who are incapable of coming into direct contact with the Greek letters, is materialized through translations of the Greek treatises into small and more condensed, “handy” to use a euphemism, handbooks. An example of a writer who resorts to such practices is Cato the Elder, who however retains a hostile attitude to the Greek studies. In other cases, borrowing from the texts of the Greeks continues, even in the form of larger developments of scientific texts, as in the case of Marcus Terentius Varro, who authored a treatise on the Greek artes liberales, a treatise which is responsible, in the Middle Ages, for the trivium and quadrivium, which formed the basis for education in Europe.

In the level of ideas, in Rome, the Socratic “how is to live” is replaced by the Senecan “quid agis?”, hence is preferred the militant element which is founded on the roman idiosyncrasy of “militare vivere est”. Ethics is thus deprived of an adequate metaphysical foundation what is significant for the Romans is the direct action, the functional interference. This ascertainment is enhanced by the emphasis on voluntas (volition), a concept which is developed firstly in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* and later, less coarsely, in Cicero and Seneca. For the Romans, the occupation with labyrinthine logical and dialectical formations is not important, as a matter of fact they often express cer-

tain irony for the Greeks and their tendency to remain in the theoretical sphere. On the contrary, the Romans become engaged with the organization of the Polity, a polity with globalized characteristics. In this context belongs the view of Cicero that the roman justice of the Res Publica incorporates indeed natural law, thus comprising a legal system which fosters virtues, discourages vices and guides citizens to a eudaimonistic living. The Roman law is almost perfected, according to the Roman thinker, and the rest of the people, in other areas of the world, should implement it if they truly wish to be led securely to virtue and eudaimonia.

The emphasis on individual conscience and on internality is another issue that is highlighted in the Hellenistic Era, as an epiphenomenon of this transition of science, philosophical currents and values. In Greece, the Polis remains hierarchically first, as the supreme form of human living according to Aristotle, while in Rome the individual emerges to some degree as the suffering subject (a notion that becomes useful later on for the philosophies of existentialism), but also as the matter for the creation of an instrument that rules and prevails over anything individual. Thus is lost the comprehension of the political, in the form that was perceived by the Greeks, debasing the citizen and leading him to an era devoted to the State and to representation, to the era of Locke and John Stuart Mill.