

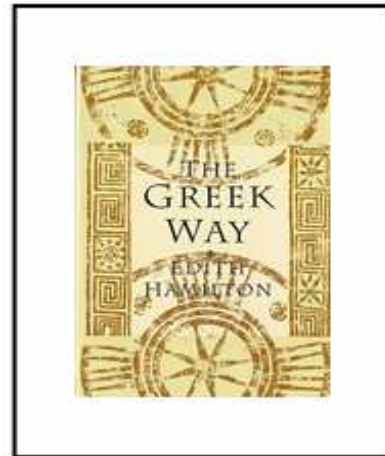


Book Review: **The Greek Way**

Hamilton, Edith. (1993). *The Greek Way*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company. 272 p.

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Edith Hamilton's Book *The Greek Way*: A brilliant explanation on how philosophy evolved from flawed anthropomorphic deities which is itself beset by biases and limitations as proponent of all things Greek



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The main tenet of Buddhism that one needs to perceive material existence as a volatile, and evanescent arrangement of the elements of matter has its foundation in science and personal experience, and this tenet is far from the absurdity that Edith Hamilton indirectly imputes it as being in her book, *The Greek Way*, a work conflating history, history of ideas, sociology, literary and fine art criticism, and commentary that is not easy to categorize. For those on the

verge of retirement, who might in a given moment stand with hands akimbo, and stare out disconcertedly into open space, stolid demeanor shaken, and equanimity more fluid with the recent passing away of friends and loved ones who, as Shakespeare phrases it, causes such individuals to “drown an eye, unused to flow, for precious friends hid in death’s dateless night,” reality is not the firm substance that Hamilton alleges it as being.

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A zealous, if not extreme, proponent of the uniqueness and exceptional grandeur of Greek culture and the advent of humanism that it engendered, which to her, makes it better than all other civilizations and cultures both early and modern, Hamilton's book attempts to espouse all Greek art as a unique blend of spiritual materialism; and yet, as though dismissive of ancient arguments by pre-Socratic thinkers on whether thought is a more viable and credible substance than mutable matter, an insoluble *rational* versus *empirical* argument developed respectively by Heraclitus and his nemesis, Parmenides, that is as salient today as it was thousands of years ago, Hamilton, in her book, argues that Greek art from statues and the figurines painted on pottery to poetry, drama, history, and philosophy, is exceptional for not only accepting the reality of material existence, but in celebrating it fully. To her, art is only "spiritual" once it emphasizes the pulchritude of form in its variations that are sometimes pleasant and unpleasant, and even vile and mundane, but always earthy, sinewy, and beautiful. Thus all other cultural expression prior to or existing at

the same time as this new Western expression of humanistic Greek art, art like the Sumerians and Egyptians that was deliberately rendered religious in tone and monolithic and stylized in its uniform expression of unseen beatific worlds, is vastly inferior to Greek art, if scarcely art at all, with ornaments emblematic of an unseen celestial realm. It is a biased argument; and if one does not marvel at the amount of erudition that is comprised in such a judgment, one might wonder if her assessments are more from personal taste than rational discernment.

Often being such a proponent impedes her judgments. She refuses to accept the inherent contradiction that Athenian wealth and democratic institutions were predicated on slavery and imperialism as the Athenian Delian League of democracies was almost as tyrannical against member states as Sparta toward her Peloponnesian alliances prior to and during that horrendous 27 year old Greek conflict between the two sides known as the Peloponnesian war. She also seems to think that Herodotus was right in saying that Greeks won the Battle of Marathon and the Battle of Salamis against



the Persians because they were” freedom lovers” (her words, as Herodotus stated this more indirectly) who would not succumb to the will of a tyrant. It is a rather simplistic notion. She emphasizes the contrast of Persians burying war criminals and their children alive and the Spartan tendency to release such children unharmed, but ignores the Spartan practice of subjecting male infants to die from exposure if they deemed them impaired by weakness or deformity or that families in all Greek societies abandoned some children in forests to allow them to die of exposure when there were too many members who made the family units economically unsustainable (both Greeks and Romans expected high infant mortality, and sometimes this did not occur). At other times facts, interpretation, or a combination seem slightly wrong. Whereas Paul Cartledge, a Spartan historian would argue that the Spartans deliberately procrastinated in coming to the rescue of Athens after Eritrea, a city adjacent to Athens, was ravaged and burnt by the Persians, Hamilton blames it on the monolithic nature of democracies, with Athenians incapable of making their

request in an expeditious manner.

However, the accuracy of all her facts and her biased interpretations notwithstanding, she makes the reader love Greek culture by evincing and discussing snippets of poetry and prose of the highest and most thoughtful nature throughout the work. Her purpose is to examine specific works of art that she believes to be proof that Ancient Greek artistic achievement is by far the greatest in the world, and to offer an explanation, rightly or wrongly, of why such ideas developed as she vaguely outlines the evolution of those ideas. This entails showing, among other forms of art, the nonpareil contributions to the written language of the poet Pindar, known for his mellifluous eloquence of the highest diction, if not grandiloquence, often in discussing particular athletes in the Olympic games, the historians of Herodotus and Thucydides, the first playwright Aeschylus, the satirical playwright Aristophanes known for his trenchant criticism of Socrates, the historian and biographer Xenophon, and the tragic playwrights of Sophocles and Euripides. To gain our credulity that this is the most glorious of civilizations, and for



the reasons that she has identified, all that is needed is dazzling erudition, enthusiasm, and intelligible interpretations; and this she does so well-so well, in fact, that the reader not only accepts her notion of spiritual materialism but her obloquy that, “the Western world has not taken outright the way of the spirit, nor the way of the mind, but wavered between the two, giving adherence now to one, now to the other, never able finally to discard either yet powerless to reconcile their claims.” Only Greek society, in Hamilton’s opinion, has been able to achieve this acme of spiritual materialism.

Hamilton divides her book into seventeen chapters, with some of the chapters devoted to one specific writer, and others emphasizing various writers or an explication of fine art. Outside of personal taste, it is really inexplicable why she would choose an entire chapter devoted toward Pindar when admitting that his musical meter and rhyme scheme cannot be translated into English and was unpopular even in his lifetime, or a chapter on the biographer and historian Xenophon, a friend of Socrates who seems to have written

his lackluster biographical profiles of Socrates for the purpose of vindicating the perception of Socrates after his death. There are three faces of Socrates: the gadfly, Socrates, portrayed by Plato long after his death, the lunatic Socrates in the hilarious parody of the man by Aristophanes, and the rather dull portrait of a demure Socrates who is respectful of gods and tradition created by Xenophon; and like us all, Hamilton does not know the real man. If Hamilton’s particular artistic favorites did not influence her choices for the book, then perhaps it was for the purpose of explaining the historical development of major ideas in Ancient Greece. In any case, she is remiss at doing the latter very well. Her work fails to give an appropriate time frame for major events and personages. To compensate for that, any reader of *The Greek Way* should be familiar with the following: The Persian Wars (492-449 B.C.E); Aeschylus, the earliest and greatest playwright (525-456 B.C.E); The Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E); Sophocles (497-406 B.C.E); Euripides (480-406 B.C.E); Socrates (470-399 B.C.E); Plato (428-347 B.C.E); and Aristotle



(384-322 B.C.E).

Perhaps, outside of enthusiasm for Greek art, the most remarkable and long lasting idea that the classicist propounds in her book is the idea that the fallibility of Greek Gods caused religion to morph into philosophy. This is especially true in Athens, which due to its wealth and its democracy was the magnet or cultural oasis that most intellectuals gravitated to. The Athenians early on understood that the pantheon of Greek gods was altogether too human to be divine. Homer and Hesiod had portrayed them as sybarites, adulterers, drunkards, and megalomaniacs who loved playing chess against each other using their human pawns especially during the Trojan War. As Xenophanes (not to be confused with Xenophon who came later) said it so well, “But if cattle and horses and lions had hands or could paint with their hands and create works such as men do, horses like horses and cattle like cattle also would depict the gods’ shapes and make their bodies of such a sort as form they

themselves have.” Often this is shortened to a more pithy and eloquent line of “If an Ox could draw, it would draw a god that looks like an Ox.”

By creating this germane idea, Hamilton might be in effect saying that educated and thoughtful individuals seeking “arête,” the Greek word for excellence, will pursue truth at any cost, even if it means relinquishing religious fables and eschewing religious convention. From there religion will morph into philosophy, and then, we can infer, it will turn into science. However, for whatever reason, Hamilton’s book leaves out the greatest scientist and ethicist of all time, Aristotle. Still, few works have the power to inspire modern readers to return to the Greek intellects who were undoubtedly the most sophisticated individuals the world has ever known with early pre-Socratic thinkers even proposing rudimentary scientific ideas like the Big Bang theory and Evolution which Hamilton’s book fails to acknowledge.