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 978-0-521-11811-8 - The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought  
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 Excerpt  
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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

**M**AN, *anthrōpos*, was the centre of the world for the Greeks, and a review of all they thought about him would involve discussion of most of their literature and art. This book has no such wide scope or ambitious aim. Its theme is not the whole Hellenic conception of man, but the development among the Greeks of ideas about one aspect of humanity—the unity of mankind; an aspect which never had more than a minor place in their thought, although it may seem all-important in the twentieth century A.D.

In our own day human unity is generally seen as a practical problem. We take as a self-evident fact the existence of the human race as a distinct species, an aggregate made up of individuals whose present numbers are approximately known; and with almost equal readiness most of us draw the inference that between all these representatives of *homo sapiens* there is some sort of kinship or fellowship which should influence their behaviour towards each other. ‘One world’, ‘the human community’, ‘the brotherhood of man’, are phrases on everybody’s lips, and their theoretical validity is hardly called in question. The crucial issue, as we see it, is the gap between theory and practice: the paradox of a human race acknowledged in theory to be a single family, yet split by divisions of creed and colour which threaten its destruction. The solution is commonly sought not in reconsideration of the basic theory, but in the practical field of organisation, and attempts at practical world co-operation become more and more a characteristic feature of our time.

The Greeks, of course, knew nothing of all this. The conception of human fellowship as a practical problem scarcely entered their thoughts; still less, any organisational means of solving it.

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Although modern civilisation owes them much, the United Nations Assembly and the disarmament conference are not part of the debt. In their thought the unity of mankind had quite another place, and my main concern in this book is not with any practical conclusions which they drew from it, but with the development of the notion itself and the changes of mental outlook which that development involved; to some extent, with the movement of their minds towards a position which we—partly thanks to them—take for granted.

My subject, in short, is the emergence of an idea—or rather, perhaps, of an attitude of mind. It is not a matter of tracing the changing use of any one Greek term, although a number of words—*homonoia*, *philanthrōpia* and others—play their part in the story. The process with which we are concerned was a far more complex and gradual one than has sometimes been supposed. The concept of the unity of mankind has been treated as a doctrine ‘discovered’ by a single individual, and variously attributed to Antiphon, Alexander, Zeno, and other rival claimants. But the history of thought is not so simple. The true picture is a long and complicated chain of development to which many individuals contributed, including some—Plato and Aristotle, for example—who are often denied a place in this company. Apart from those who made contributions of reasoned and stated doctrine, there were many others whose beliefs had implications, important though only half realised, for the growth of the same theme; while behind and beneath the movement of conscious thought lay the background of unconscious assumptions, already in existence when our evidence begins, and continually changing as the new ideas of one generation were absorbed into the accepted mental outlook of the next. After all, the very use of the word ‘man’ implies some underlying notion, however unrealised, of a unified type to which the word refers; and the whole process with which we are dealing may be seen not as the building of a doctrine, but as the ever-changing elaboration and enrichment of the content of a concept which was in existence from the first.

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The evidence for this theme is as complex as the development of the theme itself, and is to be found at many points in our whole knowledge of the Greek world. Much might be inferred from Greek institutions and the events of Greek history, just as today conclusions about the real strength of our belief in human fellowship might well be drawn from the successes and failures of the United Nations. A study of slavery from this point of view would be fruitful, or a survey of the relations between outlying Greek communities and their 'barbarian' neighbours, or of the various attempts at combination between the Greek states themselves. However, in the present book the limitations of the author and the extent of the subject have combined to prevent such a wide range of view: I have confined myself to the literary evidence, bringing in some slight account of institutions or events only where it seemed essential for the understanding of the documents I wanted to cite. It is significant that no single Greek work deals specifically with the subject of human unity or mankind as a whole, and authors' opinions on the matter have to be sought out in writings on other themes. The principal source, of course, is the philosophers; but from Homer onwards there is relevant material in all sections of Greek literature. Poets, orators, historians, pamphleteers, medical writers—all in one passage or another throw some light on the development of the idea of the unity of man. A great deal of the evidence, unfortunately, is fragmentary, or available only at second hand or worse; and inevitably some pages here and there have been given up to discussion of the reliability and the interpretation of the evidence itself.

Hellenic civilisation in its early days provided far from fertile soil for the growth of the concept of the unity of mankind. In spite of the Greeks' deep concern with man and his destiny, they knew less than a modern schoolchild about the material facts of the human situation. They had comparatively little knowledge of the physical make-up of man or the other animal species. They knew almost nothing of his history—very little even of that brief segment of it which constituted their own past. From the small

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area of land and sea familiar to them they looked out upon a largely unknown world. Their chief guide to man's nature was observation of him as they saw him within the narrow limits of their own environment; and although this brought them profound understanding of some aspects of life, it was not likely to lead them towards the idea of human unity. On the contrary, the pattern of living which geography and history gave them was a natural breeding-ground for prejudice and division, and its fruit was an outlook which put far more emphasis on the differences than on the kinship between men.

Two modern curses they were spared—violent nationalism and colour prejudice. But hostility towards the outsider was one of the most marked features of Greek life, whether it was felt by the citizens of one city against all other Greeks, or by Ionian against Dorian, or by all those who spoke Greek against 'barbarians' who babbled in unintelligible tongues. Within the unity of the city-state there was again division. The natural difference between the sexes was widened by the inferior status and the seclusion of women. Between slave and free lay a gulf which most Greeks accepted as a fact of life just as unchangeable as sex or race. Less sharply defined, but little less widespread or persistent, was the antithesis within the citizen body itself between high and low, 'good' and 'bad' (as the 'good' called it); a distinction based first on birth and later on wealth, which affected the life of society in many ways besides the constant political conflict which was characteristic of the city-state.

Among these unpromising circumstances it may well seem unlikely that any realisation of the concept of universal human unity or fellowship would emerge. But time brought changes, and the keen Greek intellect was not slow to move towards fresh theoretical conclusions. The human species became more clearly distinguished from gods on the one hand and animals on the other. Growing geographical knowledge, which at first only emphasised the diversity of mankind, led in the course of the years to the idea of a total human population of the habitable world, though this

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remained a far more hazy notion than in these days of the camera and the aeroplane. Most important of all, the movement of history brought modification, sometimes even a breakdown, of the accepted prejudices and discriminations—a process which necessarily has a large place in this book, for it is complementary to the growth of the idea of unity, and the acid test of the strength of its impact on the mind. The extent of the change must not be exaggerated. To a large degree it consisted in a shifting of the dividing lines: the antithesis between Greek and ‘barbarian’ gave way to the distinction between the possessors of Hellenic culture and those who remained outside it; in the eyes of a minority at any rate, wisdom took the place of birth or wealth as the mark of the ‘good’ members of society in comparison with the ‘bad’. All the modifications that came about were primarily adjustments of mental attitude, and had no great practical result. Yet with all these limitations it remains remarkable that even on a theoretical level the divided and conflict-ridden Greeks moved so far in the direction of the idea of a common fellowship linking all mankind.

All this, of course, is only part of a much longer story. Thought about man did not begin with the Greeks, and if I have taken Homer as my starting-point and said nothing of Eastern ideas which may have had some influence in Greece, I do not imply that no such ideas or influence existed; my only claim is that it is possible to treat the development of the concept of human unity among the Greeks as a single connected process, understandable in itself, and this is what I have made my theme.

More difficult was the choice of a place to stop, for it is obvious that the development of ideas which I am tracing continues without interruption through the Roman period, and has a sequel in more modern times which is still working itself out today. That I should include Cicero within the scope of the book, but not discuss Philo or St Augustine, may seem like the result of tossing a coin or mere inability to go further. In this last explanation there is indeed some truth, but I believe a rational case of sorts can be

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put forward for making Cicero the end of the section of the story with which I have tried to deal. He comes into the picture not so much in his own right, but rather as our chief witness for views of mankind common among educated people in his own and earlier generations, and in particular for the doctrines of Panaetius, Posidonius and Antiochus; and these thinkers, though greatly influenced by the new situation which Roman domination had brought into being, nevertheless belong to the same essentially Greek line of thought which goes back to Homer. The line, of course, does not end there; but after this point it becomes interwoven with strands from other sources—Hebraic and Christian, for example—which in their turn need to be traced back to non-Greek beginnings.

It will be evident that my aim in this book has been limited to a review of the Greek prelude to Roman and Christian ideas of the unity of man. I hope that this may seem to have sufficient relevance to the modern situation to be of some interest to others besides classical scholars, and for this reason I have tried to avoid anything that might make my account unintelligible to those who cannot read Greek or are unfamiliar with the details of Greek history. All quotations are given in translation (except where otherwise stated, my own) and Greek words are mentioned only here and there, where their use seemed necessary.

At the same time, I have for the most part resisted the temptation to apply modern terminology to ancient theories or to suggest modern parallels. In treating a subject which is so alive today nothing is easier than to read back twentieth-century ideas into documents which in reality have quite another meaning, or to seek views comparable with our own in situations where they did not, and probably could not, arise—to make a Sophist of the fifth century B.C. anticipate modern internationalism, or see Alexander as the first champion of the idea of world government. Some sort of equivalents can no doubt be found in antiquity for ‘Western civilisation’, ‘international brotherhood’, ‘co-existence’ and many of the other stock phrases of contemporary political

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argument, and the ancient world may appear in a more vivid light if we see it as anticipation of our own. But the modern terms do not really fit, the parallels are never completely comparable, and the usual result of both is to blur, rather than to illuminate, the historical facts. In some discussions of Greek thought about mankind I believe this line of approach has already led to a good deal of distortion, and my aim has been to discuss the ancient evidence in its ancient context, leaving to the reader the question of its relation to the modern world.

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## CHAPTER II

## FROM HOMER TO HIPPOCRATES

## THE HOMERIC PATTERN

THE *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are still our earliest sources of information on Greek thought about man. It is true that archaeological discoveries and the decipherment of Linear B tablets have now enabled us to form an increasingly detailed picture of Minoan and Mycenaean civilisation, including some conception of the actual relationships and divisions which existed within society perhaps as early as 1500 B.C. But so far nothing has come to light from which we can discover what ideas these pre-Homeric Greeks held on the human race and its place in the scheme of things. This can be learned only from literature, and therefore—until some fresh discovery changes the situation—from the rich store of evidence that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain.

A remarkable feature of the Homeric picture of mankind is its uniformity. I do not mean, of course, that there is any lack of individual variety among the people of the two epics, or that everyone is on the same level in the society which they portray. The picture is uniform—more so, indeed, than most that we find in later Greek literature—in the sense that it depicts a single pattern within which all, or almost all, human beings have a place. There is no explicit statement of this unity in either poem; but as an unconscious assumption it is present throughout both, and provides a basis for that deep understanding of the common human lot which gives them much of their greatness.

In Homer's world there are many cities and many peoples, but nowhere is it suggested that any group which can rightly be called human lies outside the common pattern. There is no



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contrast between foreign goats and Achaean sheep. The pattern applies equally to both sides in the Trojan War: the Trojans, who in later literature became the prototype of the 'barbarian' enemies of Greece, are seen here with the same eyes as the attacking Achaeans.<sup>1</sup> Hector is no less a hero than Achilles, Priam fully as noble as Agamemnon. Difference of speech does not form the sharp dividing line which it later became, although there are a number of references to it in the poems. Troy has many allies with different tongues, so that while the Achaeans move into battle in silence the Trojans are like a great flock of bleating sheep: 'for they did not all have the same way of speech or a single tongue, but their language was mixed, and they were brought from many lands' (IV. 437–8).<sup>\*</sup> Odysseus describes Crete as an island of countless men, with ninety cities: 'and they have a medley of different tongues' (19. 175). The adjective *allothroos*, 'speaking a strange language', is a regular epithet of foreigners in the *Odyssey*. Yet there is no suggestion in Homer of the deep gulf which later centuries created between Greek-speaking peoples and users of 'barbarian' ways of speech. The word *barbaros* does not occur in these epics except in the compound adjective *barbarophōnoi* applied to the Carians in the *Iliad*, where it probably refers to the way in which they spoke Greek.<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Homer does not appear to distinguish between differences of language and differences of dialect.

Even peoples who lie further afield and come incidentally into the story are cast in the same mould as the rest of humanity. Although the Egyptians are *allothrooi* (3. 302), neither this nor any consideration of race or colour causes any special antagonism to them in Odysseus' story of his visit to Egypt (14. 257 ff.). The Phoenicians receive harsher treatment, behind which may lie antipathies roused by trade rivalry between them and the Greeks. In two passages of the *Odyssey* they are greedy tricksters, using theft and kidnapping and slave-dealing as means to wealth; but

<sup>\*</sup> Roman figures for book-numbers refer to the *Iliad*, Arabic numerals to the *Odyssey*.

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in another Odysseus tells a story in which they deal fairly by him and refrain from stealing his goods when they leave him on shore.<sup>3</sup> Although Homer comes nearer to prejudice against another people here than anywhere else, even the Phoenicians' villainy is an aspect of the one human pattern, and their commercial methods do not put them beyond the pale. Yet more remote from the centre of the Homeric world, but still part of the same picture, are distant peoples like the Abii of the extreme north, 'the most well-ordered' (or 'civilised'?) of men, and the 'blameless' Ethiopians, 'Burnt-Faced-Men', of the far south, whose colour does not prevent them from being favourites of the gods.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that in the regions described by Odysseus in his story of his travels, which later Greek writers and some modern scholars have sought to identify with places in the eastern or central Mediterranean, but which really belong to folk-lore or fiction, there are monsters and other strange beings with some human characteristics whose conduct *does* place them beyond the pale, outside the general pattern of humanity just as they are outside normal geography. But these are exceptions that prove the rule, since for the most part they are described as not human at all. The huge Laestrygonians are 'not like men, but like giants' (10. 120). The land of the Cyclops is 'bereft of men' and feeds innumerable wild goats, 'for the tread of men does not scare them away'. Polyphemus is 'a mighty monster, not like a man that eats bread'.<sup>5</sup> These passages are the first expression of a conception which recurs in one form or another at many points in the development of Greek thought about mankind: the idea that only those who conform to certain standards can properly be called men or included within the unity of the human race.

The problem of the causes of the uniformity of the Homeric picture is one to which we are not likely to find a complete answer. It is not a reflection of the general contemporary situation in the eastern Mediterranean area: the period in which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are commonly supposed to have reached their present form seems to have been a time of growing differentiation rather