



Mini Review

The Hellenic Roots of Ecological Ethics

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Abstract

Paper presents the views on nature prevailing in the Greek antiquity, which expressed the infinite respect of the Greeks towards nature. This was depicted in the works of the great philosophers of the time, especially of the pre-Socratics, but also by their actual attitude towards environmental threats along with the establishment of laws protecting the environment, tens of centuries before our era.

An ancient Greek city, Sybaris, is presented, which, 2700 years ago, was erected and operated under ecological rules that could be used as a model for modern cities plagued by an endless variety of environmental problems.

Introduction

Our planet is in danger. The dramatic changes in the environment, most of which are caused by human activities, seem to be disastrous. Looking for one responsible for this adverse situation, one finds himself in front of a relentless answer: Human nature lies at the base of these trials of life on the planet. And this is most clearly depicted in the Orphic Cosmogony [1,2].

Hera, Zeus's consort, full of hate for Dionysus, her husband's exogenous son, urged the Titans to kill and dismember him and, in the sequence, they ate him raw.

Zeus, got wrathful because of this hideous act and burnt them out by his thunderbolts. But from the ashes of the Titans, our own race of mortals was born, a race mixed and ill-favoured, both Dionysian and Titanic.

Humans, elusive forms, deeply ignorant of their own nature, without circumspection to watch when the evil moves around them, without vigilance to detect danger before it comes too close, unable to take advantage and make use of good, even when they are in possession of it, they remain constantly vain, paranoiac and frivolous.

Because the nature of humans is dual: From the ashes of the Titans they have inherited the earthly element, attachment, ignorance and pugnacity. But from the limbs of heavenly Dionysus, which they devoured, the Titans acquired spontaneously a heavenly

and immortal nature, e.g. the ability to become themselves true gods.

No better account on the true nature of the animal with the big brain, destroyer of his environment and eventually of himself can be given.

Greek Philosophers on Nature

The relation of man with nature appears to be the favourite theme of Hellenic philosophers and not only, according to the following examples.

Theophrastus [3], a disciple of Aristotle, authored *On the History of Plants* and *On the Causes of Plants*, where a harmonic relationship appears between plants and the place they grow.

On the equilibrium concept of nature, Simplicious wrote in his book *to the Nature* [4]. The matrix, out of which things are born is the same as the one into which they decompose, as it is necessary to occur, because they get punished and restored mutually for the injustice, according to the order of time. This phrase, attributed to Anaximander suggests that everything is subject to the law of dynamic equilibrium, because, for new organisms to be born, older organisms must die, since all entities are born from the same matrix (e.g. the same material).

In Plato's *Timaeus* one reads: Truly the world has been fashioned in such a way that feeds himself with what is destroyed

from himself. Hippocrates, in *On Airs, Waters and Places* [5] notes that the health of people as well as their disposition and creativity is formed according to their natural environment, but also by factors such as quality of water, nutrition and the climate.

As a rule, ancient Greek philosophers reject the anthropocentric principle, e.g. that the nature was created to serve man, in fact suggesting exactly the opposite. The whole of the ecosystem is a living organism, an unbroken chain, a Totality, as science tends already to accept nowadays.

As opposed to the three monotheistic ones, the ancient Greek religion was never anthropocentric. The nature was deified, a whole containing mortals, gods and semi-gods, animals, plants, mountains and woods.

In many places of ancient Greece, festivities were conducted to worship nature and the change of seasons [6]. It was a usual practice to ban logging, fishing and hunting in and around sacred places, such as groves, temples, fountains and altars, since the deity living in the place was inherent in all of the entities of its natural environment.

The ancient Greeks used to attach a deeper philosophical and religious meaning to the environment and the way of living in it, and, should deviate from the latter by disturbing natural order, he was committing a hubris [7], and Nemesis was soon to follow.

At this point, one must refer to the myth of deluge, which can be found in practically all of the ancient peoples, according which one or more deities punished people for their disobedience by sending a flood to destroy them. This myth became known thanks to the biblical story of Noah's Ark, the Hindu story of Manu, the Hellenic myth of Deucalion's deluge and the story of Utnapishtim in Gilgamesh Epic.

Nowadays, with glaciers to melt, water level of the oceans to rise to critical limits and extreme weather phenomena to be all the more frequent, one may wonder whether the ancient deluge is just one out of repeated disasters, due not to the wrath of gods, but to maltreatment of nature by man, as it is happening nowadays.

Ancient Greek Cities

In the ancient Greek cities, especially in Athens, people had taken care for public health and for the protection of the environment. Resolutions were binding cheesemakers and tanners to keep their workshops outside the city walls, while, on many occasions, fines were imposed for violation of the rules for the protection of public health and the environment.

Public works, such as for irrigation and sewerage, were constructed with full respect of environment. Town planning for residential areas as well as strict delimitation of cultivated land suggest that this was just a matter of good administration only but

also a way to establish the conviction that the city must live in harmony with nature by applying optimum measures.

Exorbitance against nature may lead to terrible consequences, as suggested by Plato in *Timaeus* and *Critias* in the myth of Atlantis, a city whose citizens grew vain and arrogant and came into conflict with gods, nature and eventually with themselves. In the ancient world, attempts to subjugate nature was unthinkable of, a straightforward insult to the gods.

It is worth noticing that most Greek philosophers have written at least one book each "on nature", in which they all admit certain basic principles, such as the unity of nature, a fundamental principle of ecology, its influence on human behaviour and its acceptance as an example for measure in the human society.

An Environment-friendly City

An example of a Greek city taking exceptional care for its environment, was Sybaris, an ancient Greek colony in the fertile plane of Leucania, between rivers Sybaris and Krathis at a short distance from the gulf of Taranta in Magna Graecia (Figure 1). It was built in 720 BC by Achaians from Eliki και Ions from Troezen.



Figure 1: Magna Graecia.

Swiftly acquired wealth and abundant riches made the name of Sybarite synonymous to soft and voluptuous.

Archbishop Eustathius [8] of Thessalonika tells the following about the Sybarites. «...πρώτοι γάρ, φασί, Συβαρίται και τὰς ψοφούσας τέχνας ἐξώρισαν τῆς πόλεως, οἷον χαλκέων, τεκτόνων και ὁμοίων, ὅπως αὐτοῖς εἶεν ὕπνοι πανταχόθεν ἀθόρυβου». (... They were the first to remove from the city the "polluting arts", e.g. coppersmiths, stone ma-sons etc. so that no noises disturb the peace of sleeping citizens).

Also they used to work on a rotation basis to minimize pollutions. 28 centuries ago, the Sybarites were aware of the threats

of environmental pollution, not only by suspended particulate matter, but also of noise pollution, and imposed strict measures for the protection of people.

Finally, chariots and wagons were not allowed to circulate in the paved streets of the city at specific hours of the day in order that the city be kept as quiet as possible at sensitive hours.

In the year 510 BC, the Crotonians [9], winners of a war against the Sybarites, within one single night, they flattened the city.

Just to compare with the current situation of the planet, one must note that in the year 8000 BC, at the dawn of agriculture, earth population did not exceed 5 million, to reach 200 million by the year 1 AD. By a parabolic interpolation one can obtain a rough estimate of 80 million for the year 3000 BC, which certainly sounds infinitesimal in front of the terrific 9.8 billion expected in 2050 AD. For a number of reasons, drastic birth control on a global basis is highly unrealistic, without destroying the essence of our civilization.

The effects of this tremendous increasing rate on the environment has been catalytic: Global warming, climate change, deforestation, plant and animal extinction are among others the main threats against life on the planet and there is a great need to deal with them urgently in view of the possible collapse of the earth ecosystem in the near future.

Review and Conclusion

The image emerging out of the Greek mythology is a nature “full of gods”, a sort of a game where mortal men and immortal gods as well as all creatures are members of a whole in which even the stars are included. In general, deification of nature in the ancient Greek religion was substantially contributing to the respect and protection of the environment and to the proper relations of man with the rest of the ecosystem.

The numerous examples here presented indicate that the ancient Greeks had a deep respect for nature which they considered to be their mother and nurse. Every element in nature, e.g. river, lake, mountain, even trees had its own spirit and by respecting it, people respected the corresponding element as well, eventually protecting it from people’s mal-treatment. It is sad that, on some

occasions, members of the priesthood of the Greek Orthodox Church, interpret this admirable attitude towards nature as idolatry. Nature is not created to cover current needs of insatiable humans, but the latter are supposed to serve and protect nature. This was the common view of practically all of the Greek philosophers but also of lay people, who used to apply these principles in their cities as well as to all of their transactions with the environment.

The modern world is once more encountering problems of existential importance, which can hardly wait any more. As always, it is once more worth turning to ancient Greece for counselling and support. Provided that it is not already too late.

References

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4. Fleet B (2014) Simplicius on Aristotle Physics 2 Bloomsbury Academic.
5. Stevenson DC The Internet Classics Archive by, Web Atomics. World Wide Web presentation is copyright.
6. Mariolagos D (2017) See for example Ilia’s, The Moleia of Nestani: A Most Ancient Ceremony Dedicated to Water and the Environment: A Geo-Mythological Approach, Proc. Int. Conf. “Ancient Greek and Contemporary World”, Univ. of Patras Editions.
7. In its ancient Greek context, it typically describes behavior that defies the norms of behavior or challenges the gods, and which in turn brings about the downfall, or Nemesis, of the perpetrator of hubris.
8. Eustathius of Thessalonica a Greek scholar and Archbishop of Thessalonica, most noted for his contemporary account of the sack of Thessalonica by the Normans, for his orations and for his commentaries on Homer, which incorporate many remarks by much earlier researchers.
9. Crotona is a city and comune in Calabria. Founded c.710 BC as the Achaean colony of Kroton (Ancient Greek: Κρότων, Latin: Crotona), it was known as Cotrone from the Middle Ages until when its name was changed to the current one. In 1992, it became the capital of the newly established Province of Crotona.