
The Adoption of Greek Philosophy and Culture by the Romans

Greek Philosophy, as adopted by the Romans

The Roman Empire is looked back upon as one of the most influential civilizations of human history. Their philosophical, technological, and artistic developments would remain unmatched by the rest of the Western world for over a thousand years after the Roman collapse. However, the Romans weren't entirely original. Before there was Rome, there was Greece. As the Romans expanded and became in closer contact with the Greeks, they began to absorb the rich Greek philosophy and culture, which in many ways was very similar to existing Roman ideas. However, many Romans rejected this Greek influence, because they believed it a threat to their way of life and a corruption of the mind.

The beginning of the Roman empire was not the end of ancient Greek culture. The Greek schools of philosophy were sustained even with the encroachment of the Roman empire, as even the Romans considered Greek culture to be worth preserving. Even during the height of the Roman empire, the Greek schools were being sustained and expanded. Even some of the emperors of Rome were active in promoting and adding to Greek philosophical ideas. Marcus Aurelius, known as 'the Philosopher Emperor', was heavily influenced by the Greek philosophers, and much of what he is known for writing and spreading was a result of this Greek influence. The height of the Roman empire was much in debt to the philosophy brought in by the Greeks.

The Roman writer Cicero was himself a student of Greek philosophy, and was a supporter of Greek Stoicism. Cicero, in *The Laws*, explores the stoic idea of natural law: "Surely there comes nothing more valuable than the full realization that we are born for Justice, and that right is based, not upon men's opinions, but upon Nature" (Sources 74). Cicero had completely bought into the idea of Natural law governing the universe. He claims that virtue, which exists only in man and God, is a "likeness between man and God" (Sources 74). This idea of virtue is nothing but perfected nature.

Patriotic Romans, particularly in the more unstable Roman Empire, were strongly opposed to Greek philosophy, as the influence and credibility of the Greek philosophy was a threat to the idea of total superiority of all things Roman. As Greek philosophers began to come into Rome, there developed a sharp divide between obsessive admiration and general disdain for the philosophers, particularly between young Romans being exposed to it for the first time and older

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conservative Romans concerned with Roman superiority. The attractive reasoning of Stoicism made sense to many younger Romans, but the conservative powers of the time were not so fond of it.

The Greek Plutarch discusses this tension in his work *Lives*. “So that it soon began to be told that a Greek, famous even to admiration, winning and carrying all before him, had impressed so strange a love upon the young men, that quitting all their pleasures and pastimes, they ran mad, as it were, after philosophy; which indeed much pleased the Romans in general” (Sources 76). Plutarch then contrasts this to Cato the Elder, a conservative Roman who denounced Socrates and warned that Greek philosophy would cause Roman youth to engage in similar inflammatory behavior (Sources 76). Furthermore, Cato would have it that all philosophers be “cleared out of the city” (sources 77), and was afraid that philosophy would bring destruction upon the Romans, although Plutarch seems to think “as, in truth, the city of Rome has risen to its highest fortune while entertaining Grecian learning” (Sources 77).

This attitude held by Cato was out of fear of revolution from the Roman youth. After what had happened to Socrates, Cato was not looking for more subversive action amongst the youth, which developed into a rather strong stance against all philosophy. This is clearly in contrast to the fanatic Roman students and academics. It really didn't matter to Cato just how convincing the natural law that Cicero described so well was. This conservative perspective was to Cato almost like something out of the McCarthyism of America in the 20th century.

What is so striking about Cato's case is exactly what he is in opposition to: generally the stoicism from the Greeks was a positive ideology stemming from ideas of fairness and justice. Cicero claims “... then the origin of Justice is to be found in Law, for Law is a natural force; it is the mind and reason of the intelligent man, the standard by which Justice and Injustice are measured” (Sources 75). What is so hostile about this? The origin of Roman opposition to philosophy had almost nothing to do with the philosophy itself, but rather the fear of the behavior of those that followed it.

It is evident that Rome was massively influenced by hellenistic philosophy. However, by no means did everybody agree on it. This disagreement, as evident by the writings of Cicero and Plutarch, seems to be, on the outside, simply a massive misunderstanding of the ideological principles of Greek philosophy. However, Cato the Elder really didn't care about what the philosophy actually was. His disagreement was exclusively due to fear in an uprising and a change in power that would put him out of authority. However, Cato and those in support of him were the unsuccessful group. The philosophy of the Greeks lasted much longer than the rest of the Greek empire, as the legacy of the Greek philosophers was continued by those in Rome.

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