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Identifying A Classic: The Example of Ancient Greece

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Abstract

That the study of the past is subject to the perspective of the present is, for most, beyond dispute. Historians can not be impartial recorders since they are conditioned, if only unconsciously, by the flow of history itself. One can attempt to recognize and set aside opinions of one's own world, understanding earlier cultures as "other". Yet, even the terms of reference and the language in which they are expressed condition the resulting narrative. Such recognition, though limiting an ability to understand the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen" does not imperal study and appreciation of earlier cultures. However, a more recent tenet does: in the eyes of constructivists, those who study the past construct the very objects of their knowledge. Objects, even texts, are in flux according to their relation to the assumption and procedures of the investigators and their societies who see what they are conditioned to see. This view renders study of the past at best an exercise in ingenuity or even fruitless.

My attempt is to undercut-perhaps even disprove-this positon. Certain elements from past cultures are extraordinarily ubiquitous and lasting through vast sweeps of time. I believe that there are grounds for trusting the concreteness of such elements. First since they are rooted in elemental human concerns, they are timeless. Second, they are so brilliantly demonstrated within their own time frame that they have become admirable in their own right. Both of these qualities produce a third: they provoke a desire to know more about them and to use this knowledge to understand and inform the present. While my example is ancient Greece, I propose that these qualities pertain to "classics" in all cultures.

On October 28, 1997, the London Times carried an article with the headline, "The Way forward is Plato, not Prozac." Its more specific sub-heading read, "Americans are abandoning psychiatrists and turning to philosophers to solve the problems of modern life." Since this was the day that Dr. Huang telephoned with an invitation to participate in the Third International Conference on General Education, the coincidence was an auspicious omen for a gathering intended to explore Chinese [and other] Classics as Core Curriculum in modern education. As one whose world centers as much on ancient Greece as on the late twentieth century CE, my focus is on the Greek classics although I believe that their relation to the present is typical of the classics of all cultures.

In spite of that favorable omen, another less encouraging factor had become part of my regular reading and reflection; namely, the tenet of certain post-modernists that secure knowledge of the past is impossible. In the eyes of some - often termed constructivists - those who study the past construct the very objects of their knowledge.[1] Texts particularly, but objects as well, are in flux according to their relation to the assumptions and procedures of the investigators and the current societal values of those investigators. One definition of the postmodern attitude claims, "Hard and fast notions of identity (of what the past really is ....), hard and fast categories of analysis and understanding are thus to be avoided". At another point the same writer declares, "The Classical past does not reveal itself in its essential character but has to be worked for. This leads to the question: what sort of Classical past do we want?" In a word, what we want conditions what we find.

This position renders study of the past at best an exercise in ingenuity - a game whose players reach relative positions but possess no criteria by which to judge the correctness of any one stance of value. Consequently, a "classic" from the past has no claim to absolute identification as such.

It is possible to answer the assertions of post modernists as Richard J. Evans has done admirably in his account In Defence of History[2] in which he maintains that the past does speak through the sources and is recoverable through them. Evans acknowledges that investigators of the past bring to their study theories and

concepts of their own time. Still he insists that study of the sources is "a matter of interaction between reader and writer" (I would add viewer and objects to include non-textual sources). "In this encounter neither is necessarily or inevitably dominant" (107). Quoting E.H. Carr, Evans writes of history as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (225). Each party in the dialogue has certain - probably different - beliefs, values, means of expression, goals. It is the obligation of the present inquirer to be conscious of the nature of these elements in the present as he/she seeks to define them in the past. "Our prejudices and preconceptions will slip in unnoticed and skew our reading of the evidence", Evans asserts, "if we abandon our self consciousness" (230f).

The argument goes some distance toward restoring objects, texts, and even concepts that have been accorded the status of classics. If there is unanimity among sufficient numbers of present inquirers into the relationship of past and present, we may place some trust in a vote of the majority. There is, however, more support than numbers. A recent article in the The New York Sunday Times Magazine by Garry Wills[3] points in the direction of another response to those who would effectively eliminate secure identification of "classics." Wills began with this paradox:

> The canon - that body of (western) thought and art that is supposed to be at the core of all our education - is succumbing to attack or neglect, opposed as repressive or dismissed as irrelevant..... Which prompts a question. If the classics are a sinking ship, why are so many people beating their way (often against stiff opposition) to clamber on board ? (38)

After a cogent survey of the nature of the present interest and changes in regard for the past over time, Wills offers a key to this classical revival - "the ancient texts have become eerily modern..." (42). Advancing his case further, he concludes that, "The classics only become classics when they are relevant again." Pressing these two points harder, I believe that an even stronger case can be made to identify the texts and objects advanced as classics. Certain elements from past cultures are extraordinarily ubiquitous and lasting through vast sweeps of time and, I suggest, there are grounds for trusting the concreteness of such elements. First

since they are rooted in elemental human concerns, they are timeless. Second, they are so brilliantly demonstrated within their own time frame that they have become admirable in their own right. Both of these qualities produce a third: they provoke a desire to know more about them and to use this knowledge to understand and inform the present. Objects and texts possessed of these qualities tend to be "eerily modern", that is, relevant, to many cultures in very different periods.

To argue my premise, I will use ancient Greek examples of both texts and objects. Perhaps it is well to begin with texts inasmuch as postmodernists following de Saussure argue that everything is discourse or text.[4] A much abbreviated genealogy of textual history from ca. 750-400 BCE will be accompanied by an even briefer glance at physical objects of this same period.

For the Greeks, in the beginning there was Homer, creator - NOT author in the sense of one who wrote a text - of the Iliad and Odyssey. Among ancient Greeks themselves, Homer was THE poet to use Plato's words (Laws 901A) and the two epics attributed to him have won an enduring popularity that is unparalleled.[5] An explanation for such renown is their subjects: the Iliad is a tale of war and all the emotions associated with it: suffering and death, anger and fear, selfishness and selflessness, defeat, victory, loss of life and survival. The Odyssey's themes are journeying, homecoming, changes discovered, faithfulness and faithlessness, reconciliations and retributions. Every one of the issues turns on elemental human concerns. And those facing these concerns include the full sweep of being: mortals (men, women and childrenm), immortals, animals, and the natural world.

From its origin in oral poetry, ancient Greek literature branched in nearly every direction, first with Hesiod into didactic poems: the Theogony and the Works and Days. A reckoning of the world's development from its deepest origin is the purpose of the first poem and, as its title indicates, the development was due to the force of immortal agencies - earth, sky and water in the earliest ordering to a myriad of forces including several generations of deities in later stages. While specific identities are unique to early Greek culture, the larger issue is not: all peoples must come to terms with the nature of their world, especially those aspects and concerns that are far greater than human.

The subject of the Works and Days is equally universal. Often called "a farmer's almanac", the poem describes the fabric of life within a small agrarian community. Much of the information is practical advice - when to plant, how to construct a plough - but as important are the ethical and moral issues of life. What is justice? How should one treat a neighbor? I submit that the concerns strike at the core of life for every community of people since the Neolithic Revolution.[6]

Hesiod is generally dated to the late eighth century BCE while the creative process, identified by many as the bard Homer, is placed some fifty years earlier. Objects dating to this period illustrate the same quality of concern with issues that exist in all times and every society. An over-riding element of both the figural arts and architectural structures is a striving for order. In form and decoration, potters, sculptors and builders sought proper proportions and a relationship among parts that suited the entire object.[7] (See figure 1). Their attempt would persist not only into

Figure 1 Monumental Geometric amphora; Athens c. 750 BCE

the classical period of Greek culture but it has become a common architectural and artistic tradition to the present day. One explanation for such a degree of persistence can be found in the universal requirement of all artists to impart order tounshaped materials - stone, timber, metal and clay - even when the intent is to impart a sense of disorder. Greek art and architecture, especially in its early stages, show with clarity the path of solving this fundamental issue.

Hesiod revealed his personality far more than did Homer but not as fully as those in the next branching of the textual tree - the lyric poets whose themes were individual passions and concerns. Beginning with such poets as Archilochus the swaggering mercenary soldier, Sappho who declared her passionate love and Alcaeus who took to the sea for reasons of political unrest as well as financial gain, lyric poetry increasingly enfolded life within the community. Tyrtaeus produced songs to embolden Spartan warriors, Pindar celebrated victors of games along with their cities: Solon told his fellow Athenians why reform was vital for all members of the community and he was not reluctant to remind them how difficult was the task of the would-be reformer - himself. At the same time, another branch in the genealogy of Greek literature was the more formal statement of communal life in law codes and inscriptions of other matters that affected all.

The physical manifestations contemporary with these products of words boldly declare their new focus: the human form dominates visual arts as artisans came to agreement on canons of pattern, ratio, and dimension. The objects of the seventh and sixth centuries - whether built or carved or fashioned on a potter's wheel - were intended to show respect for more than human elements of life; to honor people for accomplishments in this world or to remember them after death; to facilitate the common life. Akin to the creations of words, they convey their intent directly and on a scale that gives the impression of grandeur without overwhelming the human perspective. The directness as well as the scale of Greek art render the results intelligible to ordinary viewers.

Perhaps it is not amiss to note a trait of figures depicted during this period: namely the frequent slight smile of their mouths (see figure 2). Painters and sculptors were beginning to explore inner being as well as exterior form. As in the

case of their fascination with order, so too is the Greek artists' willingness to depict the wholeness of human life a constant issue that confronts every artisan. An artisan MAY concentrate on a particular aspect of being to the exclusion of others, but this is possible only on the recognition of the existence of more than a single dimension.

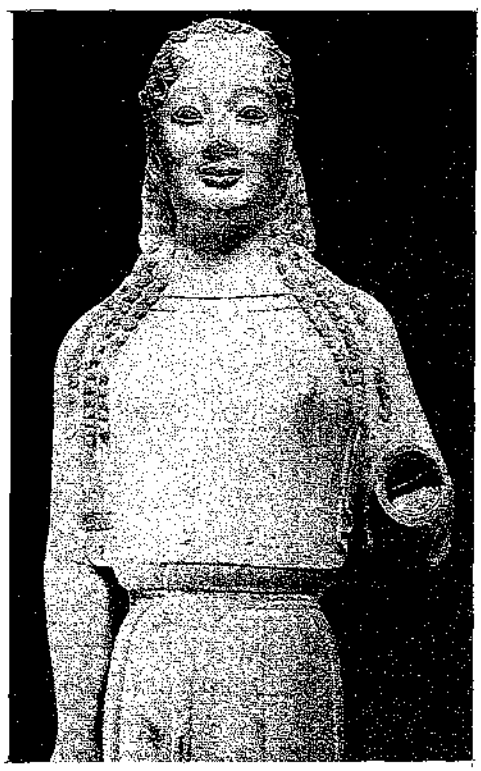

Figure 2 Peplos Kore, Athenian Acropolis c. 530 BCE

During the fifth century, more branches of literary investigation sprouted and quickly flourished. Pre-Socratic thinkers wrestled with huge questions: what is the physical nature of the world; is there abiding unity beneath apparently constant chance; how can we know anything? Those thinkers grouped collectively as the "Sophists" confronted more squarely the role of mortals within their world and, in the process, they became teachers as well as theorists. In response to the sophistic inclination toward offering answers to immediate situations, Socrates argued for

abiding answers by means of unchanging, absolute values - the good, the true, the beautiful. His legacy would produce the encyclopedic scrutiny of knowledge in the dialogues of Plato and the tracts of Aristotle.

Dramatists brought the search for understanding of mankind's lot into the view of thousands of spectators in the public theatres. The fifth-century tragedies examine the bonds between mortals and immortals, one person and another, all members of a community among themselves, a person with his/her own being. Differing in tone but not intent, the comedies dig at the same issues.

Two additional directions of inquiry also turn on the attempt to understand and to improve the situation of mortals. Treatises of the "sons" of Asclepius need no argument to demonstrate their value to human existence.

Historians had the same goal: Herodotus deemed it essential to preserve an account of the confrontation between Persians and Greeks so that it would be remembered by subsequent generations while Thucydides brusquely annouced that his account of the Peloponnesian War would be a possession for all times. So revolutionary were these directions that they brought about a change in the form of recording; prose, not poetry, became the vehicle for the first historians and scientists. The universality of the concern to know one's past must be obvious.

Creations of artisans during this high classical age only reinforce the impression that the proper object of man's study was mankind. By the fifth century, one can speak of a "doctrine" that, in the words of Kidson, "man, not some formal abstraction, but man in the concrete richness of his experience was the proper subject of mimesis."[8] (See figure 3.) For all the richness of experience depicted, the products are readily understood. Hellenic art is not enigmatic; rather it is purposeful and its purpose is clearly defined: by form - the shapes of ceramic vessels defined their functions; by location - monuments erected on an acropolis sacred to the immortals were defined by their context; and, increasingly, by appended inscriptions.

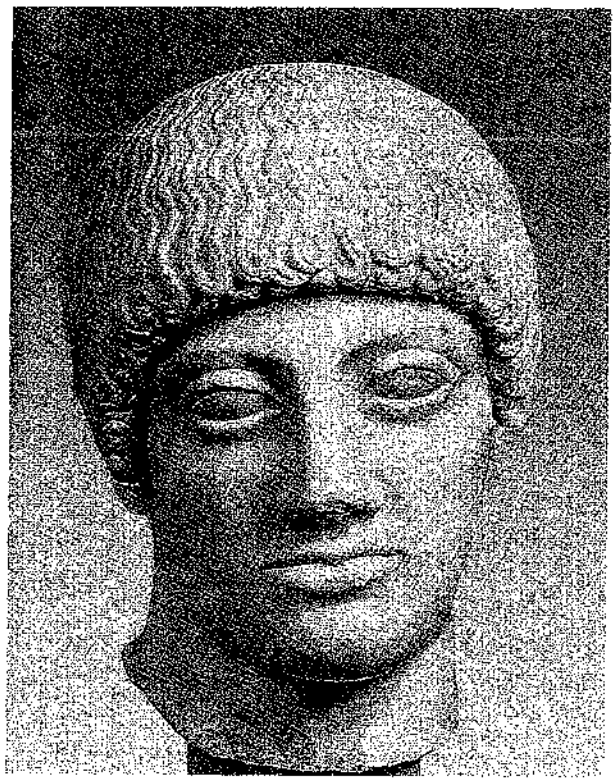

Figure 3 Blond Boy c. 480 BCE

This is an appropriate point at which to turn to the second quality essential in a work that becomes a classic: it must convey its subject brilliantly. I would single out the directness of exposition and the grandeur of expression of the Greek classics, both texts and objects. Authors speak directly to their audiences. In the case of "textual" classics, "authors" truly did so, by means of oral performance well into the fifth century BCE.[9] Their language - beautifully rich innately - was tailored to be intelligible and pleasing, and it was made even more appealing through its musical quality and, often, actual instrumental accompaniement. Some 17,000 spectators who filled the Theatre of Dionysius in Athens to suffer along with Oedipus, Antigone, Agamemnon, and Medea had to grasp the actors' (authors') words as they were spoken and sung, and they were aided by the allure of the vehicle.

Objects, too, had huge audiences since the arts were intended for the whole community rather than private collection and, thus, were located in full, open view. An amphora, altar, or statue of a maiden on the Acropolis gained much of its meaning from its location. And the artists of the fifth century sought to express form and essence plainly; viewers could identify instinctively with the figures created without wrestling to pierce an allegorical meaning.

In their search for proper form to suit function, the makers of these objects found canons so durable that they evolved in a straight line for more than 350 years. One conclusion is that these canons were pleasing as well as understandable; that artisans, as well as Socrates, were in pursuit of absolute beauty.

By way of example of their ability to speak to elemental human concerns that exist in all cultures and to speak in brilliant fashion, I return to a passage from Homer coupled with several physical objects (see figures 4, 5, 6).

Figure 4 Attic Black-figure vase by Nearchos c. 550 BCE

Figure 5 Relief stele of a kouros Sounion c. 485 BCE

Figure 6 Stele of the so-called "Grieving Athena" c. 450 BCE

So they fought on, and the iron tumult went up into the brazen sky through the barren bright air. But the horses of Aiakides standing apart from the battle wept, as they had done since they heard how their charioteer had fallen in the dust at the hands of murderous Hektor. In truth Automedon, the powerful son of Diores, hit them over and over again with the stroke of the flying lash, or talked to them, sometimes entreating them, sometimes threatening. They were unwilling to go back to the wide passage of Helle and the ships, or back into the fighting after the Achaians, but still as stands a grave monument which is set over the mounded tomb of a dead man or lady, they stood there holding motionless in its place the fair-wrought chariot, leaning their heads along the ground, and warm tears were running earthward from underneath the lids of the mourning horses who long for their charioteer, while their bright manes were made dirty as they streamed down either side of the yoke from under the yoke pad. As he watching the mourning horses the son of Kronos pitied them, and stirred his head and spoke to his own spirit: 'Poor wretches why then did we ever give you to the lord Peleus, a mortal man, and you yourselves are immortal and ageless? Only so that among unhappy men you also might be grieved? (17.424-445)

I hope to have made a case for timeless and brilliant features of what are regularly termed the Greek classics within their own age. But, being even bolder, I propose that the two features taken together result in a third: so powerful is their address to human needs and so brilliant is their form that they have become objects of admiration in other ages. In the case of the Greek cultural tradition, its power spread widely even within the very time that it was being created. Etruscan delight in Hellenic things preceded the flood of influence in eighteenth century England and France by 2500 years.[10]

More than attractive, however, true classics can speak to concerns in other times. Some years ago, my husband (Richard R. Johnson) and I proposed a scheme in connexion with our study Paths from Ancient Greece[11] that echoes this assertion. In summing up the impact of Hellenic influence on subsequent cultures, we found examples in which it was far more than decorative; rather it was genuinely configurative upon the cultures influenced by it. In this respect, there is some value in weighing the evidence in a quantitative fashion. Since time does not permit a full reckoning, let me return to my point of departure. So universal are the themes of the Iliad and Odyssey that the Athenian tragedians were describe as "slices from the banquet of Homer" and from that time "Homer has been", in Jasper Griffin's words (39), "central to the imagination of the West." Evidence includes poets inspired by the epics - Virgil, Milton, Tennyson, James Joyce, Kazantzakis and Cavafy; translators who endeavor to extend it to a wider audience in both written and spoken form; travellers and archaeologists who search the places described in the poems; veterans of wars as recent as the Vietnamese conflict who attempt to understand the effects of fighting[12]; scholars who devote their lives to understanding Homer and Homeric poetry. In a word, the poems do seem to deal with problems that concern humans in many ages for a great variety of motives. The specific word "odyssey", for instance, describing the wanderings of one man Odysseus has become synonymous with any wanderings. Ten years ago, my husband and I were lecturers on a cruise ship carrying its travellers on a "Western Mediterranean Odyssey".[13]

It is time to link this attempt at defining classics to the other theme of this conference: general education. Henry Rosovsky's 1976 definition of the purpose

of undergraduate education at Harvard set out six attributes of an educated person. Such a person must be able to think and write clearly and effectively; must have a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves; cannot be provincial in the sense of being ignorant of other cultures and other times; should have some understanding of, and experience in thinking about, moral and ethical problems; should have good manners and high aesthetic and moral standards.[14] It is the role of general education to insure the acquisition of these abilities.

I have argued that a classic treats timeless human concerns in an intelligible, brilliant fashion. New classics are being created, to be sure, but those texts and objects that have been found durable over a long span of time have been tested both by drawing study in their own rights and by their use for informing the present. With the Greek "classics"as my model, I wonder if this is a scheme that might define classics in any and every culture. A New York Times review of the exhibit, "China: 5000 years", at the Guggenheim Museum in New York through June 3d, encourages a positive answer.[15] Most important for the present purpose, the article recognizes "a core esthetic of astounding consistency for thousands of years". In a word, this enduring cultural canon seems to me to compare with the persisting use of the Hellenic esthetic. Also relevant to my thesis is the reviewer's observation, "one of the incidental pleasures of the show is to see how completely at home Chinese sculptures and ceramics look in Frank Lloyd Wright's modernist space". Why this should be true (and thus not surprising) is due, I propose, to both the objects' ability to speak to a range of fundamental human concerns across 5000 years and to do so with exceeding power and beauty. The flowing lines of Han bronze, for example, are "miracles of fluidity in a notoriously recalcitrant medium" (all quotes B33).

But I must defer to the judgment of those who are adept at "reading" the classics of Chinese and other cultural traditions. A favorite photograph leads me to conclude that this regularly occurs, albeit often without a conscious intent to prove the existence of "Classics". The photo shows a group of young art students drawing from a model. The students are Chinese; the model is a classical Greek statue.

Notes

1. Michael Shanks, *Classical Archaeology of Greece: Experiences of the discipline* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 179.

2. London: Granta, 1997.

3. "There's Nothing Conservative about the Classics Revival", February 16, 1997.

4. On the validity of this definition, the words of Evans are valuable: "To call the past a 'text' is of course to use a metaphor, not to attempt a description. The past is much more than a mere text, and to attempt to read it as a text is to capture only a small part of its reality. Social and political events are not the same as literary texts." (110)

5. Jasper Griffin, "Reading Homer after 2,800 years", in *Archaeology Odyssey* (premier issue 1998) 34-39.

6. One might note the merger of several interests in the work of Chun-chieh Huang- combining study of Confucian and Mencian thought with agrarian reform in the present - as an excellent case in point.

7. Chapter Two of J. Hurwit, *The Art and Culture of Early Greece 1100-480 B.C.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 71-124, is entitled simply, "The Idea of order 760-700." Creation of order continues to be perhaps the most important force in Greek art and architecture for at least 350 years. See Peter Kidson, "Architecture City Planning" and "The Figural Arts", in M. I. Finley ed., *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (Oxford, 1981) 376-400 and 401-428.

8. 419.

9. I was struck by the present-day appeal of this directness of discussion in the obituary of the French philosopher Marc Sautet (*London Times*, April 1, 1998, p. 21). Sautet held informal Sunday discussions in cafes in the Bastille area of Paris, calling them "cafes for Socrates." The author of the obituary comments, "This was philosophy for the agora, a return to the rudiments of reasoning, rather than high-flown discourse."

10. A note to the Ashmolean Museum exhibit of Hawksmoor's architectural designs for eighteenth century Oxford says simply, "Hawksmoor was fascinated by all aspects of the classical tradition, whether in antiquity, the Renaissance or the recent work of the Italians ....."

11. *Paths from Ancient Greece* (Leiden: Brill 1988).

12. J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York and Toronto: Athenaeum and Maxwell MacMillan, 1994).

13. Even as this conference proceeds, the film directors, the Coen brothers, are filming an adaptation of the *Odyssey* set in the American South. Criticised in the past for making "witty but empty movies", they have turned to "big themes" and, # in fact, may taunt their critics with a credit at the start of the film stating, "Based upon the *Odyssey* by Homer. How's that for a theme, you bastards?" *London Times* April 7, 1998, p. 32.

14. Dean's Report 1975-76, 4 and 5; the sixth quality of an education person is depth in some field of knowledge.

15. Holland Cotter, "Tricky Mirror of Chinese Power", *New York Times* February 6, 1998, B29 and 33.

尋找經典：以古希臘為例

Carol G. Thomas*

摘 要

對過去的研究毫無疑問必須受限於當下的視野。歷史學家不論是否有所自覺，因爲已受歷史的制約，因此不可能成爲絕對客觀的紀實者。有人或可以依此認知，嘗試排除個人所處世界的偏見，將過去的文化視爲「他者」，但是最終的敘述不免受制於所參考資料的術語，以及表述時所用的語言。這樣的認知雖然使得我們無法「宛若親臨」般瞭解過去，但並不會傷害我們對於過去文化的研究與欣賞。但是近來另一新興的學派，建構派則影響甚鉅，因爲此派學者認爲我們對於過去事物的知識乃是由我們對過去的研究所建構出來的。他們認爲一切事物，包括文本，都是隨著探究者的假設與研究過程而變動，而這些探究者又是受到自身所處社會所能提供視野的制約。這種觀點讓歷史研究充其量僅能是個人聰明的運用，甚至可能完全徒勞無功。

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本篇論文嘗試要對抗這種觀點，甚至證明其爲誤謬。過去文化的有些元素是極其顯而易見，且經久不變的。我認爲由足夠的事實讓我們可以相信這些元素具體存在。首先，它們都是根基於人性基本的關懷，是不受時間影響的；其次，這些元素因爲在其所處的時代，已經有精彩的展現，因此本身即足以令人景仰。此二種特質帶來第三種：這些元素吸引我們去對其更加認識，且利用所得的知識來瞭解當下。雖然我所舉的例子是希臘，我將提出這些特質普遍存在於眾文化的經典中的觀點。