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## The Polis

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‘Polis’ is the Greek word which we translate ‘city-state’. It is a bad translation, because the normal polis was not much like a city, and was very much more than a state. But translation, like politics, is the art of the possible; since we have not got the thing which the Greeks called ‘the polis’, we do not possess an equivalent word. From now on, we will avoid the misleading term ‘city-state’, and use the Greek word instead. In this chapter we will first enquire how this political system arose, then we will try to reconstitute the word ‘polis’ and recover its real meaning by watching it in action. It may be a long task, but all the time we shall be improving our acquaintance with the Greeks. Without a clear conception what the polis was, and what it meant to the Greeks, it is quite impossible to understand properly Greek history, the Greek mind, or the Greek achievement.

First then, what was the polis? In the *Iliad* we discern a political structure that seems not unfamiliar – a structure that can be called an advanced or a degenerate form of tribalism, according to taste. There are kings, like Achilles, who rule their people, and there is the great king, Agamemnon, King of Men, who is something like a feudal overlord. He is under obligation, whether of right or of custom, to consult the other kings or chieftains in matters of common interest. They form a regular council, and in its debates the sceptre, symbol of authority, is held by the speaker for the time being. This is recognizably European, not Oriental; Agamemnon is no despot, ruling with the unquestioned authority of a god. There are also signs of a shadowy Assembly of the People, to be consulted on important occasions: though Homer, a courtly poet, and in any case not a constitutional historian, says little about it.

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Such, in outline, is the tradition about pre-conquest Greece. When the curtain goes up again after the Dark Age we see a very different picture. No longer is there a 'wide-ruling Agamemnon' lording it in Mycenae. In Crete, where Idomeneus had been ruling as sole king, we find over fifty quite independent poleis, fifty small 'states' in the place of one. It is a small matter that the kings have disappeared; the important thing is that the kingdoms have gone too. What is true of Crete is true of Greece in general, or at least of those parts which play any considerable part in Greek history – Ionia, the islands, the Peloponnesus except Arcadia, Central Greece except the western parts, and South Italy and Sicily when they became Greek. All these were divided into an enormous number of quite independent and autonomous political units.

It is important to realize their size. The modern reader picks up a translation of Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics*; he finds Plato ordaining that his ideal city shall have 5,000 citizens, and Aristotle that each citizen should be able to know all the others by sight; and he smiles, perhaps, at such philosophic fantasies. But Plato and Aristotle are not fantasists. Plato is imagining a polis on the normal Hellenic scale; indeed he implies that many existing Greek poleis are too small – for many had less than 5,000 citizens. Aristotle says, in his amusing way – Aristotle sometimes sounds very like a don – that a polis of ten citizens would be impossible, because it could not be self-sufficient, and that a polis of a hundred thousand would be absurd, because it could not govern itself properly. And we are not to think of these 'citizens' as a 'master-class' owning and dominating thousands of slaves. The ordinary Greek in these early centuries was a farmer, and if he owned a slave he was doing pretty well. Aristotle speaks of a hundred thousand citizens; if we allow each to have a wife and four children, and then add a liberal number of slaves and resident aliens, we shall arrive at something like a million – the population of Birmingham; and to Aristotle an independent 'state' as populous as Birmingham is a lecture-room joke. Or we may turn from the philosophers to a practical man, Hippodamas, who laid out the Piraeus in the most up-to-date American style; he said that the ideal number of citizens was ten thousand, which would imply a total population of about 100,000.

In fact, only three poleis had more than 20,000 citizens – Syracuse and Acragas (Girgenti) in Sicily, and Athens. At the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War the population of Attica was probably about 350,000, half Athenian (men, women and children), about a tenth resident aliens, and the rest slaves. Sparta, or Lacedaemon, had a much smaller citizen-body, though it was larger in area. The Spartans had conquered and annexed Messenia, and possessed 3,200 square miles of territory. By Greek standards this was an enormous area; it would take a good walker two days to cross it. The important commercial city of Corinth had a territory of 330 square miles – about the size of Huntingdonshire. The island of Ceos, which is about as big as Bute, was divided into four poleis. It had therefore four armies, four governments, possibly four different calendars, and, it may be, four different currencies and systems of

measures – though this is less likely. Mycenae was in historical times a shrunken relic of Agamemnon's capital, but still independent. She sent an army to help the Greek cause against Persia at the battle of Plataea; the army consisted of eighty men. Even by Greek standards this was small, but we do not hear that any jokes were made about an army sharing a cab.

To think on this scale is difficult for us, who regard a state of ten million as small, and are accustomed to states which, like the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., are so big that they have to be referred to by their initials; but when the adjustable reader has become accustomed to the scale, he will not commit the vulgar error of confusing size with significance. The modern writer is sometimes heard to speak with splendid scorn of 'those petty Greek states, with their interminable quarrels'. Quite so; Plataea, Sicyon, Aegina and the rest are petty, compared with modern states. The Earth itself is petty, compared with Jupiter – but then, the atmosphere of Jupiter is mainly ammonia, and that makes a difference. We do not like breathing ammonia – and the Greeks would not much have liked breathing the atmosphere of the vast modern State. They knew of one such, the Persian Empire – and thought it very suitable, for barbarians. Difference of scale, when it is great enough, amounts to difference of kind.

But before we deal with the nature of the polis, the reader might like to know how it happened that the relatively spacious pattern of pre-Dorian Greece became such a mosaic of small fragments. The Classical scholar too would like to know; there are no records, so that all we can do is to suggest plausible reasons. There are historical, geographical and economic reasons; and when these have been duly set forth, we may conclude perhaps that the most important reason of all is simply that this is the way in which the Greeks preferred to live.

The coming of the Dorians was not an attack made by one organized nation upon another. The invaders indeed had their organization, loose though it was; some of the invaders – the main body that conquered Lacedaemon – must have been a coherent force; but others must have been small groups of raiders, profiting from the general turmoil and seizing good land where they could find it. A sign of this is that we find members of the same clan in different states. Pindar for example, was a citizen of Thebes and a member of the ancient family of the Aegidae. But there were Aegidae too in Aegina and Sparta, quite independent poleis, and Pindar addresses them as kinsmen. This particular clan therefore was split up in the invasions. In a country like Greece this would be very natural.

In a period so unsettled the inhabitants of any valley or island might at a moment's notice be compelled to fight for their fields. Therefore a local strong-point was necessary, normally a defensible hill-top somewhere in the plain. This, the 'acropolis' ('high-town'), would be fortified, and here would be the residence of the king. It would also be the natural place of assembly, and the religious centre.

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This is the beginning of the town. What we have to do is to give reasons why the town grew, and why such a small pocket of people remained an independent political unit. The former task is simple. To begin with, natural economic growth made a central market necessary. We saw that the economic system implied by Hesiod and Homer was 'close household economy'; the estate, large or small, produced nearly everything that it needed, and what it could not produce it did without. As things became more stable a rather more specialized economy became possible: more goods were produced for sale. Hence the growth of a market.

At this point we may invoke the very sociable habits of the Greeks, ancient or modern. The English farmer likes to build his house on his land, and to come into town when he has to. What little leisure he has he likes to spend on the very satisfying occupation of looking over a gate. The Greek prefers to live in the town or village, to walk out to his work, and to spend his rather ampler leisure talking in the town or village square. Therefore the market becomes a market-town, naturally beneath the Acropolis. This became the centre of the communal life of the people – and we shall see presently how important that was.

But why did not such towns form larger units? This is the important question.

There is an economic point. The physical barriers which Greece has so abundantly made the transport of goods difficult, except by sea, and the sea was not yet used with any confidence. Moreover, the variety of which we spoke earlier enabled quite a small area to be reasonably self-sufficient for a people who made such small material demands on life as the Greek. Both of these facts tend in the same direction; there was in Greece no great economic interdependence, no reciprocal pull between the different parts of the country, strong enough to counteract the desire of the Greek to live in small communities.

There is a geographical point. It is sometimes asserted that this system of independent poleis was imposed on Greece by the physical character of the country. The theory is attractive, especially to those who like to have one majestic explanation of any phenomenon, but it does not seem to be true. It is of course obvious that the physical subdivision of the country helped; the system could not have existed, for example, in Egypt, a country which depends entirely on the proper management of the Nile flood, and therefore must have a central government. But there are countries cut up quite as much as Greece – Scotland, for instance – which have never developed the polis-system; and conversely there were in Greece many neighbouring poleis, such as Corinth and Sicyon, which remained independent of each other although between them there was no physical barrier that would seriously incommode a modern cyclist. Moreover, it was precisely the most mountainous parts of Greece that never developed poleis, or not until later days – Arcadia and Aetolia, for example, which had something like a canton-system. The polis flourished in

those parts where communications were relatively easy. So that we are still looking for our explanation.

Economics and geography helped, but the real explanation is the character of the Greeks – which those determinists may explain who have the necessary faith in their omniscience. As it will take some time to deal with this, we may first clear out of the way an important historical point. How did it come about that so preposterous a system was able to last for more than twenty minutes?

The ironies of history are many and bitter, but at least this must be put to the credit of the gods, that they arranged for the Greeks to have the Eastern Mediterranean almost to themselves long enough to work out what was almost a laboratory-experiment to test how far, and in what conditions, human nature is capable of creating and sustaining a civilization. In Asia, the Hittite Empire had collapsed, the Lydian kingdom was not aggressive, and the Persian power, which eventually overthrew Lydia, was still embryonic in the mountainous recesses of the continent; Egypt was in decay; Macedon, destined to make nonsense of the polis-system, was and long remained in a state of ineffective semi-barbarism; Rome had not yet been heard of, nor any other power in Italy. There were indeed the Phoenicians, and their western colony, Carthage, but these were traders first and last. Therefore this lively and intelligent Greek people was for some centuries allowed to live under the apparently absurd system which suited and developed its genius instead of becoming absorbed in the dull mass of a large empire, which would have smothered its spiritual growth, and made it what it afterwards became, a race of brilliant individuals and opportunists. Obviously some day somebody would create a strong centralized power in the Eastern Mediterranean – a successor to the ancient sea-power of King Minos. Would it be Greek, Oriental, or something else? This question must be the theme of a later chapter, but no history of Greece can be intelligible until one has understood what the polis meant to the Greek; and when we have understood that, we shall also understand why the Greeks developed it, and so obstinately tried to maintain it. Let us then examine the word in action.

It meant at first that which was later called the Acropolis, the stronghold of the whole community and the centre of its public life. The town which nearly always grew up around this was designated by another word, 'asty'. But 'polis' very soon meant either the citadel or the whole people which, as it were, 'used' this citadel. So we read in Thucydides, 'Epidamnus is a polis on the right as you sail into the Ionian gulf'. This is not like saying 'Bristol is a city on the right as you sail up the Bristol Channel', for Bristol is not an independent state which might be at war with Gloucester, but only an urban area with a purely local administration. Thucydides' words imply that there is a town – though possibly a very small one – called Epidamnus, which is the political centre of the Epidamnians, who live in the territory of which the town is the centre – not the 'capital' – and are Epidamnians whether they live in the town or in one of the villages in this territory.

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Sometimes the territory and the town have different names. Thus, Attica is the territory occupied by the Athenian people; it comprised Athens – the ‘polis’ in the narrower sense – the Piraeus, and many villages; but the people collectively were Athenians, not Attics, and a citizen was an Athenian in whatever part of Attica he might live.

In this sense ‘polis’ is our ‘state’. In Sophocles’ *Antigone* Creon comes forward to make his first proclamation as king. He begins, ‘Gentlemen, as for the polis, the gods have brought it safely through the storm, on even keel’. It is the familiar image of the Ship of State, and we think we know where we are. But later in the play he says what we should naturally translate, ‘Public proclamation has been made ...’ He says in fact, ‘It has been proclaimed to the polis ...’ – not to the ‘state’, but to the ‘people’. Later in the play he quarrels violently with his son; ‘What?’ he cries, ‘is anyone but me to rule in this land?’ Haemon answers, ‘It is no polis that is ruled by one man only’. The answer brings out another important part of the whole conception of a polis, namely that it is a community, and that its affairs are the affairs of all. The actual business of governing might be entrusted to a monarch, acting in the name of all according to traditional usages, or to the heads of certain noble families, or to a council of citizens owning so much property, or to all the citizens. All these, and many modifications of them, were natural forms of ‘polity’; all were sharply distinguished by the Greek from Oriental monarchy, in which the monarch is irresponsible, not holding his powers in trust by the grace of god, but being himself a god. If there was irresponsible government there was no polis.

Haemon is accusing his father of talking like a ‘tyrannos’<sup>1</sup> and thereby destroying the polis – but not ‘the State’.

To continue our exposition of the word. The chorus in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*, admiring the conduct of the hero, turns to the audience with an appeal which I render literally, ‘Dost thou see, O whole polis?’ The last words are sometimes translated ‘thou thronging city’, which sounds better, but obscures an essential point, namely that the size of the polis made it possible for a member to appeal to all his fellow-citizens in person, and this he naturally did if he thought that another member of the polis had injured him. It was the common assumption of the Greeks that the polis took its origin in the desire for Justice. Individuals are lawless, but the polis will see to it that wrongs are redressed. But not by an elaborate machinery of state-justice, for such a machine could not be operated except by individuals, who may be as unjust as the original wrongdoer. The injured party will be sure of obtaining justice only if he can declare his wrongs to the whole polis. The word therefore now means ‘people’ in actual distinction from ‘state’.

Iocasta, the tragic Queen in the *Oedipus*, will show us a little more of the range of the word. It becomes a question if Oedipus her husband is not after all the accursed man who had killed the previous king Laius. ‘No, no,’ cries Iocasta, ‘it cannot be! The slave said it was “brigands” who had attacked them,

not “a brigand”. He cannot go back on his word now. The polis heard him, not I alone.’ Here the word is used without any ‘political’ association at all; it is, as it were, off duty, and signifies ‘the whole people’. This is a shade of meaning which is not always so prominent, but is never entirely absent.

Then Demosthenes the orator talks of a man who, literally, ‘avoids the city’ – a translation which might lead the unwary to suppose that he lived in something corresponding to the Lake District, or Purley. But the phrase ‘avoids the polis’ tells us nothing about his domicile; it means that he took no part in public life – and was therefore something of an oddity. The affairs of the community did not interest him.

We have now learned enough about the word polis to realize that there is no possible English rendering of such a common phrase as, ‘It is everyone’s duty to help the polis’. We cannot say ‘help the state’, for that arouses no enthusiasm; it is ‘the state’ that takes half our incomes from us. Not ‘the community’, for with us ‘the community’ is too big and too various to be grasped except theoretically. One’s village, one’s trade union, one’s class, are entities that mean something to us at once, but ‘work for the community’, though an admirable sentiment, is to most of us vague and flabby. In the years before the war, what did most parts of Great Britain know about the depressed areas? How much do bankers, miners and farmworkers understand each other? But the ‘polis’ every Greek knew; there it was, complete, before his eyes. He could see the fields which gave it its sustenance – or did not, if the crops failed; he could see how agriculture, trade and industry dovetailed into one another; he knew the frontiers, where they were strong and where weak; if any malcontents were planning a *coup*, it was difficult for them to conceal the fact. The entire life of the polis, and the relation between its parts, were much easier to grasp, because of the small scale of things. Therefore to say ‘It is everyone’s duty to help the polis’ was not to express a fine sentiment but to speak the plainest and most urgent common sense.<sup>2</sup> Public affairs had an immediacy and a concreteness which they cannot possibly have for us.

One specific example will help. The Athenian democracy taxed the rich with as much disinterested enthusiasm as the British, but this could be done in a much more gracious way, simply because the State was so small and intimate. Among us, the payer of super-tax (presumably) pays much as the incometax payer does: he writes his cheque and thinks, ‘There! *That’s* gone down the drain!’ In Athens, the man whose wealth exceeded a certain sum had, in a yearly rota, to perform certain ‘liturgies’ – literally, ‘folk-works’. He had to keep a warship in commission for one year (with the privilege of commanding it, if he chose), or finance the production of plays at the Festival, or equip a religious procession. It was a heavy burden, and no doubt unwelcome, but at least some fun could be got out of it and some pride taken in it. There was satisfaction and honour to be gained from producing a trilogy worthily before one’s fellow-citizens. So, in countless other ways, the size of the polis made vivid and immediate, things which to us are only abstractions or

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wearisome duties. Naturally this cut both ways. For example, an incompetent or unlucky commander was the object not of a diffused and harmless popular indignation, but of direct accusation; he might be tried for his life before an Assembly, many of whose past members he had led to death.

Pericles' Funeral Speech, recorded or recreated by Thucydides, will illustrate this immediacy, and will also take our conception of the polis a little further. Each year, Thucydides tells us, if citizens had died in war – and they had, more often than not – a funeral oration was delivered by 'a man chosen by the polis'. To-day, that would be someone nominated by the Prime Minister, or the British Academy, or the B.B.C. In Athens it meant that someone was chosen by the Assembly who had often spoken to that Assembly; and on this occasion Pericles spoke from a specially high platform, that his voice might reach as many as possible. Let us consider two phrases that Pericles used in that speech.

He is comparing the Athenian polis with the Spartan, and makes the point that the Spartans admit foreign visitors only grudgingly, and from time to time expel all strangers, 'while we make our polis common to all'. 'Polis' here is not the political unit; there is no question of naturalizing foreigners – which the Greek did rarely simply because the polis was so intimate a union. Pericles means here: 'We throw open to all our common cultural life', as is shown by the words that follow, difficult though they are to translate: 'nor do we deny them any instruction or spectacle' – words that are almost meaningless until we realize that the drama, tragic and comic, the performance of choral hymns, public recitals of Homer, games, were all necessary and normal parts of 'political' life. This is the sort of thing Pericles has in mind when he speaks of 'instruction and spectacle', and of 'making the polis open to all'.

But we must go further than this. A perusal of the speech will show that in praising the Athenian polis Pericles is praising more than a state, a nation, or a people: he is praising a way of life; he means no less when, a little later, he calls Athens the 'school of Hellas'. – And what of that? Do not we praise 'the English way of life'? The difference is this; we expect our State to be quite indifferent to 'the English way of life' – indeed, the idea that the State should actively try to promote it would fill most of us with alarm. The Greeks thought of the polis as an active, formative thing, training the minds and characters of the citizens; we think of it as a piece of machinery for the production of safety and convenience. The training in virtue, which the medieval state left to the Church, and the polis made its own concern, the modern state leaves to God knows what.

'Polis', then, originally 'citadel', may mean as much as 'the whole communal life of the people, political, cultural, moral' – even 'economic', for how else are we to understand another phrase in this same speech, 'the produce of the whole world comes to us, because of the magnitude of our polis'? This must mean 'our national wealth'.



Religion too was bound up with the polis – though not every form of religion.<sup>3</sup> The Olympian gods were indeed worshipped by Greeks everywhere, but each polis had, if not its own gods, at least its own particular cults of these gods. Thus, Athena of the Brazen House was worshipped at Sparta, but to the Spartans Athena was never what she was to the Athenians, ‘Athena Polias’, Athena guardian of the City. So Hera, in Athens, was a goddess worshipped particularly by women, as the goddess of hearth and home, but in Argos ‘Argive Hera’ was the supreme deity of the people. We have in these gods tribal deities, like Jehovah, who exist as it were on two levels at once, as gods of the individual polis, and gods of the whole Greek race. But beyond these Olympians, each polis had its minor local deities, ‘heroes’ and nymphs, each worshipped with his immemorial rite, and scarcely imagined to exist outside the particular locality where the rite was performed. So that in spite of the panhellenic Olympian system, and in spite of the philosophic spirit which made merely tribal gods impossible for the Greek, there is a sense in which it is true to say that the polis is an independent religious, as well as political, unit. The tragic poets at least could make use of the old belief that the gods desert a city which is about to be captured. The gods are the unseen partners in the city’s welfare.

How intimately religious and ‘political’ thinking were connected we can best see from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. This trilogy is built around the idea of Justice. It moves from chaos to order, from conflict to reconciliation; and it moves on two planes at once, the human and the divine. In the *Agamemnon* we see one of the moral Laws of the universe, that punishment must follow crime, fulfilled in the crudest possible way; one crime evokes another crime to avenge it, in apparently endless succession – but always with the sanction of Zeus. In the *Choephoroi* this series of crimes reaches its climax when Orestes avenges his father by killing his mother. He does this with repugnance, but he is commanded to do it by Apollo, the son and the mouthpiece of Zeus – Why? Because in murdering Agamemnon the King and her husband, Clytemnestra has committed a crime which, unpunished, would shatter the very fabric of society. It is the concern of the Olympian gods to defend Order; they are particularly the gods of the Polis. But Orestes’ matricide outrages the deepest human instincts; he is therefore implacably pursued by other deities, the Furies. The Furies have no interest in social order, but they cannot permit this outrage on the sacredness of the blood-tie, which it is their office to protect. In the *Eumenides* there is a terrific conflict between the ancient Furies and the younger Olympians over the unhappy Orestes. The solution is that Athena comes with a new dispensation from Zeus. A jury of Athenian citizens is empanelled to try Orestes on the Acropolis where he has fled for protection – this being the first meeting of the Council of the Areopagus. The votes on either side are equal; therefore, as an act of mercy, Orestes is acquitted. The Furies, cheated of their legitimate prey, threaten Attica with destruction, but Athena persuades them to make their home in Athens, with their ancient office

not abrogated (as at first they think) but enhanced, since henceforth they will punish violence within the polis, not only within the family.

So, to Aeschylus the mature polis becomes the means by which the Law is satisfied without producing chaos, since public justice supersedes private vengeance; and the claims of authority are reconciled with the instincts of humanity. The trilogy ends with an impressive piece of pageantry. The awful Furies exchange their black robes for red ones, no longer Furies, but 'Kindly Ones' (Eumenides); no longer enemies of Zeus, but his willing and honoured agents, defenders of his now perfected social order against intestine violence. Before the eyes of the Athenian citizens assembled in the theatre just under the Acropolis – and indeed guided by citizen-marshals – they pass out of the theatre to their new home on the other side of the Acropolis. Some of the most acute of man's moral and social problems have been solved, and the means of the reconciliation is the Polis.

A few minutes later, on that early spring day of 458 B.C., the citizens too would leave the theatre, and by the same exits as the Eumenides. In what mood? Surely no audience has had such an experience since. At the time, the Athenian polis was confidently riding the crest of the wave. In this trilogy there was exaltation, for they had seen their polis emerge as the pattern of Justice, of Order, of what the Greeks called *Cosmos*; the polis, they saw, was – or could be – the very crown and summit of things. They had seen their goddess herself acting as President of the first judicial tribunal – a steadying and sobering thought. But there was more than this. The rising democracy had recently curtailed the powers of the ancient Court of the Areopagus, and the reforming statesman had been assassinated by his political enemies. What of the Eumenides, the awful inhabitants of the land, the transformed Furies, whose function it was to avenge the shedding of a kinsman's blood? There was warning here, as well as exaltation, in the thought that the polis had its divine as well as its human members. There was Athena, one of those Olympians who had presided over the formation of ordered society, and there were the more primitive deities who had been persuaded by Athena to accept this pattern of civilized life, and were swift to punish any who, by violence from within, threatened its stability.

To such an extent was the religious thought of Aeschylus intertwined with the idea of the polis, and not of Aeschylus alone, but of many other Greek thinkers too – notably of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Aristotle made a remark which we most inadequately translate 'Man is a political animal'. What Aristotle really said is 'Man is a creature who lives in a polis'; and what he goes on to demonstrate, in his *Politics*, is that the polis is the only framework within which man can fully realize his spiritual, moral and intellectual capacities.

Such are some of the implications of this word: we shall meet more later, for I have deliberately said little about its purely 'political' side – to emphasize the fact that it is so much more than a form of political organization. The polis was a living community, based on kinship, real or assumed – a kind

of extended family, turning as much as possible of life into family life, and of course having its family quarrels, which were the more bitter because they were family quarrels.

This it is that explains not only the polis but also much of what the Greek made and thought, that he was essentially social. In the winning of his livelihood he was essentially individualist: in the filling of his life he was essentially 'communist'. Religion, art, games, the discussion of things – all these were needs of life that could be fully satisfied only through the polis – not, as with us, through voluntary associations of like-minded people, or through *entrepreneurs* appealing to individuals. (This partly explains the difference between Greek drama and the modern cinema.) Moreover, he wanted to play his own part in running the affairs of the community. When we realize how many of the necessary, interesting and exciting activities of life the Greek enjoyed through the polis, all of them in the open air, within sight of the same acropolis, with the same ring of mountains or of sea visibly enclosing the life of every member of the state – then it becomes possible to understand Greek history, to understand that in spite of the promptings of commonsense the Greek could not bring himself to sacrifice the polis, with its vivid and comprehensive life, to a wider but less interesting unity. We may perhaps record an Imaginary Conversation between an Ancient Greek and a member of the Athenæum. The member regrets the lack of political sense shown by the Greeks. The Greek replies, 'How many clubs are there in London?' The member, at a guess, says about five hundred. The Greek then says, 'Now, if all these combined, what splendid premises they could build. They could have a club-house as big as Hyde Park.' 'But,' says the member, 'that would no longer be a club.' 'Precisely,' says the Greek, 'and a polis as big as yours is no longer a polis.'

After all, modern Europe, in spite of its common culture, common interests, and ease of communication, finds it difficult to accept the idea of limiting national sovereignty, though this would increase the security of life without notably adding to its dullness; the Greek had possibly more to gain by watering down the polis – but how much more to lose. It was not commonsense that made Achilles great, but certain other qualities.

## Notes

1. I prefer to use the Greek form of this (apparently) Oriental word. It is the Greek equivalent of 'dictator', but does not necessarily have the colour of our word 'tyrant'.
2. It did not, of course, follow that the Greek obeyed common sense any oftener than we do.
3. Not the mystery-religions. (See p. 19 f.)

