

This lesson looks at Roman moral philosophy, beginning with the unwritten laws and customs governing Roman social life. Then, we follow the introduction of Stoic philosophy to Rome.

Mos Maiorum

Roman society was ruled by custom as much as by law. This was a very conservative society. The older a custom was, the more sacred the Romans held it. This network of customs was called the mos maiorum, or the custom of the ancestors. These customs governed everything from the individual family to society as a whole.

At the family level, the mos maiorum established the pater familias, the father of the family, as the head of the household. The pater familias held absolute power over his household. However, he was supposed to exercise this power with moderation and justice. Failure to do so was deeply shameful. At the societal level, the mos maiorum referred to the system of patrons and clients that comprised Roman society. Patrons had obligations to their clients, and clients in turn had obligations to their patrons.

These systems were hierarchical. One man's patron might be another man's client. This network of obligations formed a chain of responsibility, from the lowliest slave to the loftiest senator.

Roman Virtues

We can gain a clearer perspective on the mos maiorum by examining the virtues it extolled. The foremost Roman virtue was **virtus**. Though we derive the word 'virtue' from this word, in Latin, virtus meant manliness. By manliness, the Romans did not simply mean courage and strength, though those two concepts played an important role in Roman virtus. Virtus also implied the discernment to recognize good and evil and the wisdom to make informed decisions. Virtus encompassed several other sub-virtues governing a man's relationship to his fellow man, and society as a whole.

Disciplina, from whence we derive the word 'discipline,' refers to each man's need for discipline, training and self-control. The importance of this virtue was key in the iron discipline of the Roman Army. Disciplina is closely related to **gravitas**, a sort of dignified self-control that was meant to protect oneself and one's family from shame and dishonor. Also closely related to disciplina is the virtue of **constantia**, which is the source of our word 'constancy.' This virtue called on Romans to put on a brave face, even in the midst of terrible adversity. A virtuous Roman did not give up when he faced a challenge, nor did he let his enemies know when they had wounded him.

The final Roman social virtue was **fides**, from which we gain the English word, 'fidelity.' Like its English derivative, fides means trustworthiness, faithfulness, reliability and credibility. In Rome, a man was only as good as his word. Fides provided the foundation of several important aspects of Roman society, from business contracts to the obligations of patrons and clients to one another.

Considering the importance of religion in morality, it is not surprising that the mos maiorum also included several virtues concerning religion. There was **religio**, the source of our word 'religion.' Religio referred to the obligations between mortals and their gods, in much the same way that fides dealt with the obligations between patrons and clients. There was **cultus**, from whence we get the word 'cult.' Cultus governed the performance of religious traditions and rituals.

But, the ultimate religious virtue was **pietas**, from whence we derive the word 'piety.' Pietas means that one lives one's whole life according to the will of the gods. It is the expansion of

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religious practice into everyday life. A Roman with the virtue of *pietas* did not leave his religious duties at the door of the temple, but carried them with him everywhere, following the will of the gods in his business transactions and everyday life. *Pietas* was the chief virtue of Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and was a virtue often ascribed to Octavian as he set about restoring the morality and religion of the Roman people.

Finally, the Romans had virtues dealing with political service as well. A man who displayed all of these social and religious virtues could go far in the Roman state. The Roman virtue, **dignitas**, from whence we derive the word 'dignity,' means a reputation for honor and virtue. After all, there's no point in being virtuous if no-one knows how virtuous you are. Having achieved *dignitas*, a virtuous Roman would be granted **auctoritas**, the source of our word 'authority.' With *auctoritas* came the power to govern at various levels. This power granted prestige and respect in the Roman Republic. But, just like the *auctoritas* of the *pater familias*, this power came with the imperative to perform one's public duty with justice, wisdom and discernment.

Stoicism

As Greek philosophy found its way to Rome, the Romans struggled to find a philosophical framework for the *mos maiorum*. They found such a framework in the works of the stoics.

Stoic philosophy originated in Greece around 300 BCE with the philosophy of Zeno of Citium. This school of philosophy focused on the supremacy of reason over emotion. Stoics denigrated emotions as fickle, shifting, destructive and misleading, while they praised reason as the one true path to happiness. Rather than having one's happiness depend on things that are subject to chance, like social status, wealth or love, the stoics thought true happiness depended on understanding the universe and one's place within it. According to the stoics, a man whose reason aligns with nature should never be unhappy, regardless of what life brings him.

The stoics also emphasized the equality of all men, be they the lowliest slave or the loftiest emperor. They highlighted the fact that everyone, regardless of status, wealth or physical condition, had something to contribute to the whole, like the two rows of teeth, upper and lower, which seem to work against each other, but actually work together for the good of the whole body. A person's importance was not determined by society, but by nature itself, which values the toil of the slave as much as the leadership of an emperor.

This stoic philosophy aligned well with the *mos maiorum* of the Romans, especially the social virtues. *Virtus* implied a knowledge of natural law and a desire to act in accordance to it. *Disciplina* acknowledged that everyone had a place in society, and that society works best when everyone fulfills their role. Finally, *constantia* and *gravitas* both called for a similar strength of will and character, even in the face of outrageous misfortune.

Lesson Summary

To review: Roman moral philosophy began as an unwritten set of customs known as the *mos maiorum*, or the custom of the ancestors. These customs highlighted the primary roman virtues: from social virtues, like manliness and fidelity; to religious virtues, like piety and orthodoxy; to political virtues, like dignity and authority. These virtues aligned well with the Greek philosophical school known as stoicism.