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Social responsibility in ancient Greece: the role of the individual and socio-political structures [Abstract]

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Social responsibility in Ancient Greece: the role of the individual and socio-political structures

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature by offering historical insights to the concept of social responsibility, with a focus on the ancient Greek value based system.

With particular reference to classical Athens, practical manifestations of social responsibility were based on reciprocity, sponsorship and philanthropy. Thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle analysed the links between justice, virtue and social responsibility - ideals which can be achieved only through participation in and interaction with the community. Although relationships based on reciprocity remain the norm throughout this period, the belief in the attainment of virtue through the prioritisation of characteristics such as active magnanimity and generosity, provides the seeds of altruistic behaviour in the ancient world.

The distinctive approach of the Greeks to individual personality, in addition to the shame-society within which they operated, provided further incentives for social responsibility. In contrast to modern views (especially after Kant and Descartes) of the 'individual' as a unified, autonomous locus of decision and action, the Greek idea of 'participant personality' dictated the positive contribution to the life of the city and the wholehearted adherence to the norms, values and principles of the community. This 'participant' agent, who existed and operated in concentric circles (i.e. family, polis, nation), was demanded by society to act harmoniously with the aforementioned norms and even exceed its expectations. The paper concludes by drawing parallels to modern corporate practice and argues that a reinstated emphasis on individual values could also assist modern corporations become more socially responsible.

Keywords: social responsibility, ancient Greece, individual responsibility