

The fear of human beings when faced with the mysteries of life and their weakness by comparison with the vastness of nature created in them a need to communicate with the divine, with the superior powers which they believed regulated the universe and determined their own fates. Knowledge of wishes of the gods was always a sure guide for human behavior. In ancient Greece, the precise nature of these wishes was 'decoded' by the art of giving oracles, practiced by soothsayers who had the gift of understanding the signs or signals sent by the gods.

The soothsayers uttered their oracles by interpreting flashes of lightening, rolls of thunder or the flights of certain birds of prey (omens); alternatively, they might observe the direction in which the fire burned when a sacrifice was made, examine the entrails of animals which had just been sacrificed, or base judgments on the sacrificial beast's willingness to approach the altar. The interpretation of dreams was popular too, and so was palmistry. The most notable soothsayers of ancient Greece were Tiresias, Calchas, Helenus, Amphiaraus and Cassandra.

However, there were abundant instances in which the gods did not manifest themselves to the faithful in the forms of signs but spoke directly to an intermediate who for a short time was overcome by a 'divine mania' and transcended his own human essence. Here the prophet- or more usually the prophetess- entered a state of ecstasy in which he or she delivered the message from the gods to the suppliants.

These practices for foreseeing the future were the basis on which the ancient Greek oracles operated. Each oracle was located within a properly-organized sanctuary and was directly associated with one or other of the gods. Apollo was the archetypal soothsayer for the Greeks, the god who was responsible for conveying to mortals the decisions pronounced by Zeus. The most important of all the oracles, that at the Delphi, delivered the messages with the intervention of Apollo, while the oldest that of Dodona, functioned with the assistance of Zeus. 340

## Interpretation of divine signs

In order to solve the mysteries of life, humans turned towards the divine who, according to them, operated the universe and their destiny. Human behaviour relied on the wishes of gods which, in ancient Greece, were interpreted by the apostles through omens manifested by gods. The prophecies of the soothsayers hinged on various signs which they would observe around them. Besides this, dream interpretation and fortune-telling were in vogue. Nevertheless, sometimes the gods would communicate to the interlocutors directly which would overwhelm them briefly. They would present the messages of the god/divine in a state of bliss.

Moreover, the oracles had special places from where they operated and their fundamental function was to anticipate the future. They would deliver the divine messages by the assistance and reliance on each other.

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Precis word count = 128

Suggested Titles:

- i) Commands of the divine
- ii) Understanding mysteries of life



Civil society refers to all of the places where individuals gather together to have conversations, pursue common interests and, occasionally, try to influence public opinion or public policy. In many respects, civil society is where people spend their time when they are not at work or at home. For example, a group of people gather at a local park every Thursday afternoon for a game of football. Most of them arrive well before the game begins and stay for some time after it ends. Some of them go out for dinner or a drink after the game. In the course of their meetings they talk about a wide range of topics, including football but also extending to include issues such as work, family, relationships, community events, racial issues and politics. This kind of solidarity can be found in a variety of other places in civil society – such as sports clubs, bowling leagues, reading groups and social movements – where individuals get together to associate on the basis of some shared interest fostering more effective forms of citizenship. Even though people may come together on the basis of an interest they all share in common, they eventually have to develop productive strategies for dealing with conflicts and differences that emerge within the association. Team mates in a bowling league discover, on certain issues, significant differences of opinion. And yet, because they value the association and look forward to participating in its activities, they do not respond to these differences by exiting the scene. Instead, they search for the ways of interacting that will not threaten the solidarity of the group. In the process, they learn to appreciate and to tolerate social differences, a valuable skill to have in an increasingly multicultural nation. They also develop a general sense of social trust and mutual obligation, which makes society function more efficiently (this is what political scientists and sociologists are talking about when they refer to the importance of social capital). Gathering together in an association, people begin to think about their shared private interest as a collective public interest, and they try to make sure that this public interest is safe and secured. For example, the group that gets together for a weekly football game begins to talk about the park as an important community resource; if feel that the park is being mistreated or mismanaged, will organize a ‘save the park’ campaign to try to influence their local politicians and the other residents of the community. Recently, there has been growing concern that civil society is weaker than it used to be, because people are losing interest in joining associations. (As citizens become increasingly disconnected from voluntary associations, they will experience less trust and less social connection, and as a result political institutions will function less efficiently.) However, some scholars opine that many people are simply choosing to participate in different kinds of associations with fewer face-to-face meetings but supplemented with ‘virtual’ interactions facilitated by resources.

### **Questions:**

1. How does the author characterize the concept of civil society?
2. Why does civil society strive towards better socialization driven by tolerance?
3. What do you understand by the term 'Social Capital' used in this passage?
4. Why does a civil society assume the role of a public stake holder?
5. What impact is feared by the weakening state of civil society?



# Comprehension

1. The concept of civil society refers to a group of people who are socially connected and have influence on public opinion. It is an integral part of a community because it aims at maintaining cordial relations and giving voice to the common people.
2. It strives towards better socialization because it intends to create harmony and integrity among the members. They celebrate the differences and dissent which makes the civil society intact.
3. The term social capital refers to a connection of people where there is sense of responsibility for others. Moreover, it relates to overlooking the discrepancy and advancing with a common set of values and beliefs.
4. Civil society assumes the role of a public stake holder because it stands for the general public at large. Further, it safeguards & sway the political process for the good of citizens.

5. Weakening state of civil society will have drastic impact on the social fabric. People will become disconnected from each other. They will have no meaningful conversations which shapes the general opinion and this will result in the decay of political institutions.