

GREEK CONCEPTIONS OF VIRTUE

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Introduction

I shall start this discussion of the ancient Greek conception of virtue by considering some of our present-day notions of virtue and virtuous living. What comes to mind here in 21st century Ireland when we hear the word ‘virtue’? We might suggest that in the present economic climate, the virtues of thrift and prudence are making a return to public discourse. There is a hopeful feeling that the downturn will make us more community-minded and willing once again to show the virtue of charity to our neighbours. The public mood is one of shunning the vice of conspicuous consumption and becoming more temperate in our spending.

But what virtues are *really* motivating the pronouncements of those in public life? Personal glory? Cunning? Wealth? When we hear *this* list of supposed virtues, we experience intellectual vertigo, for they sound more like vices than virtues. But to the Greek poet Homer¹, these are all heroic virtues, and it is these with which I begin a brief exploration of ancient Greek conceptions of virtue.

Homeric Virtues

For Homer, a virtue² is an attribute which enables a free man to fulfill his role in life and death. Physical strength, deviousness and boldness enabled the Homeric hero to excel at challenges such as those of the battlefield, and thus achieve fame, honour and glory (*kûdos* in the Greek). One example of this is in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus returns home to Ithaca, after his long adventurous voyage, to confront the suitors of his wife Penelope. (His epic travels had involved him masterminding the Trojan horse trick, blinding the giant Cyclops and listening to the song of the sirens without perishing on the rocks). While he had been away, local noblemen had taken over his house, eating his food and drink, making free with the servant girls and, worst of all, trying to seduce his wife Penelope. To the hero, Odysseus, this is of course intolerable. His reputation demands that he wreaks vengeance on the suitors. There is no turning of the other cheek here, for self-restraint is not a Homeric virtue. So how does Odysseus exact revenge? There are over a hundred noblemen, together with their servants, eating him out of house and home: a force to be reckoned with for just one man.

As we might expect, Odysseus deploys the Homeric virtue of cunning. He dresses in ‘filthy rags grimy with smoke’³ and approaches his estate with the appearance of an old beggar. Once inside, he gathers intelligence

1 *ca.* 750 – 700 BCE

2 The Latin word *Virtus* also points to this notion of virtue as manliness (L. *Vir* = ‘Man’, as in ‘Virile’). The virtuous man was a brave warrior.

3 Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 13, 435

about the suitors, teams up with his son Telemachus and slaughters every one of the intruders using his bow and arrow, sword and spear. He then slowly hangs the women who had slept with the enemy and tortures the goatherd Melanthius to death for insulting him: ‘... with a pitiless knife they sliced his nose and ears off; they ripped away his genitals as raw meat for the dogs, and in their fury they lopped off his hands and feet.’⁴ This is the Homeric code of honour⁵ in which disrespect must be avenged in the interests of personal aggrandisement. Today we might feel that, yes, the suitors certainly did do something wrong, but that the punishment meted out was somewhat disproportionate to their crimes. From the perspective of ancient Greek heroic society, however, the insult against Odysseus, and the abuse of hospitality fully deserved the rather harsh response. In these brutal contexts, the Homeric virtues of cunning, strength and the seeking of personal glory start to look a little more like virtues and less like vices. Indeed, to Homer the Christian virtues of meekness and modesty would be vices, in that they show weakness and interfere with the hero maintaining his personal status.

The Greek for virtue, *aretē*, is also frequently translated as ‘excellence’ and this notion applies to objects as well as persons. So we might speak of an excellent sword – a sword which has the virtue of sharpness (and is thereby useful for beheading unwanted guests, a punishment Odysseus inflicts on the innocent priest Leodes⁶). The virtue of an object thus relates to that object’s function or *ergon*. A sword has the function of cutting, so sharpness is a virtue or *aretē* of a sword. If a man’s function is seen as heroic, then the Homeric virtues will be such as to enable a man to undertake heroic acts and thus achieve an heroic reputation.

Classical Period Greek Virtues

Later Greek thinkers proposed a less bloodthirsty and narcissistic *ergon* for man. Beheading and posturing had no part in this conception; in fact self-regarding action was replaced by abstract contemplation as the highest *ergon* of humanity. Instead of the action hero, we have the strange and rather comical figure of Socrates, drunkenly wandering barefoot in the marketplace (the *agora*) and telling anyone who would listen that neither he nor they actually knew anything. He died in disgrace, though. Socrates was found guilty on trumped-up charges (of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens) and was executed by drinking hemlock. To Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the *ergon* of man was to flourish, and this flourishing (*eudaimonia*) was at its highest when man, a ‘rational animal’, engaged in rational thought.⁷ In the democratic city-state of Athens, co-operation, rationality and dialogue were favoured over the hot-headed individuality of Homer’s times. So the virtues defined in this era are more recognisable to us as virtues than those of Homer. The four cardinal⁸ virtues of the Greek *polis* are

4 Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 22, 475

5 Having something in common perhaps with the *Omertà* of Sicily the *Izzat* (familial respect) and *Ghairat* (social prestige) of rural Pakistan, and the debased ‘honour amongst thieves’ of Irish gangland. Echoes of this code also emerge sometimes in international politics.

6 Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 22, 325

7 Socrates accepted his punishment with equanimity, for he saw his destination as a return to the realm of the Forms, where his thinking would be clearer, divested as he would be of his earthly body.

8 ‘Cardinal’ has its origin in L. *Cardo* = ‘Hinge’. Our moral lives ought, it implies, rotate around this virtuous hinge. They

- Wisdom: φρόνησις (*phronēsis*)
- Justice: δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosynē*)
- Temperance: σωφροσύνη (*sōphrosynē*)
- Courage: ἀνδρεία (*andreia*)

We can see that there are some commonalities between this list and Homer's - courage, for example is important in both – but we should not exaggerate the extent of this overlap. The ‘courage’ of the *polis* is more like ‘fortitude’ than the gung-ho life-and-death bravery of the Homeric hero. Socrates is courageous when he sticks to his philosophical principles and refuses to play the legal game in defending himself against impiety and sedition. He also declines his friends’ offer to flee Athens when he has the chance, after the trial but before the executioner returns from a religious holiday. Likewise, the ‘wisdom’ of this period is not the self-serving cunning of Odysseus but something far more – well, virtuous. Aristotle defines *phronēsis* as:

... a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for men⁹

In other words, practical wisdom enables us both to do the right thing for our own sake, but also to help those with whom we interact in the *polis* to move towards the good and away from the bad. Justice is similarly other-regarding, as is temperance, to the extent that we tame our animal instincts and practice rational self-control in our dealings with others. One can see the attraction of these virtues to Christianity. Indeed, the church appropriated the list of four (naming them the ‘Pagan virtues’) and added the ‘Theological Virtues’ of Faith, Hope and Charity.¹⁰ However, whilst in the Christian scheme Charity¹¹ is the chief virtue, in the Aristotelian list practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is the master-virtue. This is an interesting choice, for it is the only *intellectual* virtue amongst the cardinal virtues – the others being *moral* virtues. This promotion of *phronēsis* is of a piece with the Hellenic glorification of the power of thought. Rational cogitation ought to be *the* primary force in our ethical lives.

One significant feature which distinguishes the relationship between virtues (*aretai*) and man's function (*ergon*) in the era of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle from that of Homer is that the latter's virtues are simply means to an end, whilst the Hellenic virtues are partly *constitutive* of the end. Virtue is its own reward. So we do not deploy, say, wisdom merely instrumentally, with the intention of gaining advantage over our fellows, and thus flourishing by elevating our own position, but we deploy wisdom because to deploy wisdom *is* to flourish. A

should be pivotal in our dealings with others.

9 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI, 5, 1140^b 4

10 St. Thomas Aquinas, the 13th century Aristotelian philosopher, develops this line of thought in his *Summa Theologiae*.

11 1 Corinthians 13:13, ‘But the greatest of these is love [charity]’

flourishing life is a virtuous life. The good life is one in which we are wise, just, temperate and steadfast, not one in which we jockey for personal glory and hack down anyone who stands in our way.

Aristotle

The most developed theory of virtue in the classical era is to be found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. He gave us the important notion of a seeking the 'happy medium' in our pursuit of the good life. For Aristotle, a virtue is to be found at the mean between two vices, one of excess and one of deficiency. So, for example, the virtue of courage is located between the two opposing vices of rashness and cowardice, representing an excess and a deficiency of courage respectively. In our leisure socialising, wittiness is the desirable mean between buffoonery and boorishness.¹² It is very easy to miss these target virtues, however, for 'failure is possible in many ways, but success in only one'¹³ and being able to locate the mean in a real-life situation is itself a virtue we gradually acquire through experience: the virtue of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). This allows us to navigate the virtuous path between vicious extremes, just as Odysseus plotted a course between the six-headed monster (Scylla) and the deadly whirlpool (Charybdis).¹⁴

The virtue of *phronēsis* has had a resurgence in ethical theory in recent times. But in the real world it has some tough competition from one of the other intellectual virtues, the virtue of *technē*. Whereas *phronēsis* enables us to live the good life by finding the mean between extremes, *technē* allows us to make things. The end of *phronēsis* is *praxis* (a fulfilling life, lived socially), but the end of *technē* is *poiesis* (the making of durable products). The difference between the two can be brought out more clearly by considering where the value resides in each case. In the case of *technē*, any value it has lies in the *products* of the resultant activity, whereas for *phronēsis*, the resultant activity is a valued *end in itself*. As Aristotle puts it: 'For while making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end'¹⁵ The paradigm case of the bearer of *technē* is the shoemaker, whose *poiesis* results in shoes. The good¹⁶ resides in the *poietike* – the shoes themselves – rather than in the productive activity from which they issued. Living the 'good' life in a community setting is, however, an end in itself, and any durable products of this activity are less important than the activity *per se*. During *praxis*, the *phronimos* (the bearer of *phronēsis*) is able to develop excellences characteristic of the good life, and use these for the benefit of others in the community.

Because of the contingent nature of this enterprise however, the outcomes cannot be predicted in advance (as

12 These examples of the doctrine of the mean are from Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II

13 Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II, 1106b, 29

14 Although in quoting this, Aristotle gets his Homer slightly wrong, for he ascribes the advice Odysseus took over the matter of the correct route between the two hazards to the nymph Calypso, whereas Homer names the enchantress Circe as the source of the navigational tip. (Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 12, 219.)

15 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI

16 The word 'good' used here has the potential to mislead. A 'good' shoe only means 'a good example of its type', not an artefact with an intrinsic moral goodness.

they must be for the *technē-poiesis* system, in the form of an *eidōs* or plan), so it is not to be regarded as a process of *phronēsis* controlling *praxis* to arrive at a predetermined end but rather a continual dialogue between thought and action, in which the ends can change. This is out of step with present day managerialist notions which place great importance on control, predictability and clear aims in our economic, social and political lives. So we find more and more that the rhetoric of *technē* (not of course using the Greek word, but employing cognate language such as ‘deliverables’, ‘targets’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘performance indicators’) is displacing the key virtue of *phronēsis* – the practical wisdom to do the right thing and live a good life by virtuously navigating between extremes. What counts in a *technē*-driven society is not living well, but delivering the goods.

Conclusion

We have two main models of virtue from the Greeks: that of the ruthless glory-seeking individual and that of the wise, community-minded seeker of the good life. Aristotle is clear that the virtue of *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) ought to adjudicate between the other virtues and vices, so lesser virtues such as *technē* (technical knowledge) should be subservient to this morally-charged practical wisdom. Today, one could speculate about the extent to which the virtue of *phronēsis* and the aim of the good life for us all has been displaced by the lesser virtue of *technē* and its aim of well-controlled production, or the Homeric virtues and their aim of personal glorification. We might ask which virtue is most likely to lead to, and to be constitutive of, our *eudaimonia*: our flourishing. My feeling is that Aristotle got it right when he gave *phronēsis* (practical wisdom) this role.

Bibliography

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