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SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF "GREEK ETHICS"

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I argue that several of the main issues that became a focus for classical Greek philosophy were initially framed by Homer. In particular, Homer identifies a tension between justice and individual excellence, and problematizes the connection between the heroic conception of excellence and "*eudaimonia*" (happiness). The later philosophers address the problems raised in Homer by profoundly transforming the way each of these terms was to be conceived.

KEY WORDS: "*Aretê*," Aristotle, "*eudaimonia*," excellence, Homer, justice, Plato, Socrates, virtue

In this paper, I argue that much of what we find in the ethics of the ancient Greek philosophers is conditioned upon certain problems that had first been identified and emphasized by a much earlier generation of Greeks, especially in the supposedly pre-philosophical works of ancient epic poetry attributed to Homer.[1] As interesting as it might be to undertake a comprehensive study to defend this claim, plainly I cannot do so in the space of a single article. My goal in this paper, then, is only to make a few suggestive remarks along these lines, paying attention in particular to two of the ways in which Greek ethical thought seems very different from the ethical thought of the later West.

It does not take serious study to discern that the Greek philosophers of the classical period conceived of ethics very differently than we tend to do now. For one thing, although our moral vocabulary continues to include some reference to various virtues, it is generally recognized that most

[1] I say "attributed to Homer," to avoid the question – as essentially irrelevant to my project in this paper – whether the two surviving "Homeric" epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were written or composed by the same person. M. I. Finley thinks it is certain that they were not (*The World of Odysseus*, Second Edition, New York: Penguin Books, 1979, p. 15). The opposite view is argued in Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 37–38. A detailed and very balanced discussion of the question, which concludes that it was a single author, is given by Maurice Bowra in "Composition," Chapter 3 in A.J.B. Wace and F.H. Stubbings (eds.), *A Companion to Homer* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), pp. 38–74. By the time of the classical Greeks, of course, the authorship of these works (and others, now lost, as well as of the Homeric Hymns) was given to Homer, about whom virtually nothing was known, and about whom only legends and hearsay were available.

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contemporary ethical thought – among philosophers and non-philosophers alike – regards judgments of *actions* (or action-types) as primary or basic, and judgments of *individuals* or moral *character* to be secondary and derivative. The Greek philosophers, on the contrary, seemed more interested in discerning (and promulgating) what it was that would make a human being a *good* or *excellent* human being, rather than what it was that made an action a good or a bad one, and tended to view the latter sorts of judgments as derivative from the former. Accordingly, the preoccupations of ancient Greek ethics seem more focused on moral psychology than on the social aspects of ethics, and even when the Greek philosophers did attend to social and political issues, their tendency was to conceive of such issues in a way that made them parasitic upon what they regarded as prior questions of virtue and moral character. In this paper, my first task will be to argue that from the very beginning of Greek thought, there was a tension perceived between the evaluation of character and the evaluation of actions, and in particular between what it was for a human being to be an excellent human being, on the one hand, and what it was for a human being to be *just*, on the other. Accordingly, the Greek moralists of the classical period sought to resolve this tension. In doing so, I hope to show, both conceptions – virtue and justice – are transformed radically from their Homeric antecedents.

One of the other preoccupations of Greek ethics that seems strange to us is their emphasis on the connection between being good and being happy. In fact, some of the strangeness of the Greeks' discussions of this issue is only the product of a problem in translation: The Greeks connected being good with *eudaimonia*, but as many scholars have complained, "happiness" is not really adequate as a translation of this term. I will discuss *eudaimonia* in more detail below, but even if we were able to find an unproblematic translation of this important term, the main part of the strangeness of its place in Greek ethics would remain: Whatever *eudaimonia* means, exactly, it is that which assures its possessor, as long as it is possessed, a good and enviable life – that is, not just a life that is *morally* good, but the sort of life that everyone hopes for, including those who are not especially dedicated to the project of being moral. Contemporary moralists and ordinary people alike tend to be suspicious of the very idea that there could be a single highest good for all human beings, and even more suspicious of the idea that if there even is such a thing the best way to procure it is through the purest of ethical living. Human life, we sometimes think, is all too often a "vale of tears" even for the best of us, whereas others, far less commendable in moral terms, live enviable lives. The Greek philosophers would deny this, and I believe their commitment to denying

it derives, again, from problems first posed in Homer. But their denial also reflects a dramatic change from the earliest conception of the good life as it is portrayed in Homer. In both of these most basic elements of ancient Greek ethics, then, we will find that the philosophers' views reflect a kind of "paradigm shift" from those we find expressed by – and embodied in – the Homeric heroes.[2]

I will begin by surveying the Homeric antecedents to these two peculiarities of Greek ethical thought, and will then supply very brief summary accounts of how the three main ethical philosophers of the classical period, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, responded to the problems identified in Homer. I conclude with a few brief remarks about what is common among the philosophers' responses, and how this reflects a common effort to solve the most ancient ethical challenges of their culture.

I. *ARETÊ VERSUS* JUSTICE

Most scholars agree that the earliest of the surviving works of Greek literature is Homer's *Iliad*, which can be dated to perhaps 750 or 700 BC, but which relies on an oral tradition going back for centuries before it was written. Homer's epic poem tells of events occurring in the tenth and final year of the Greek invasion of Troy, focusing in particular on a terrible quarrel between Achilles, the Greeks' greatest fighter, and Agamemnon, the leader of the invasion. Achilles is known as "the best of the Achaians,"[3] which is what the Greek invaders called themselves, and it is clear what it is that qualifies Achilles as "the best" of them. Nothing in Homer's poem (or any later Greek literature, for that matter) suggests that Achilles was the best from any point of view that we would normally consider to be *moral*. Indeed, Achilles is portrayed as a man of excesses in every way. The first

[2] I say "portrayed in Homer" and refer to "the Homeric heroes" because I am not at all confident that Homer himself – whoever he was – shared the moral views we would associate with his characters. Indeed, as I will try to show in this paper, I think that Homer actually does much to show the *failings* of his characters' views, thus pointing the way to the later philosophers' positions. My suspicion is that Homer's own views would be much closer to those of the philosophers than to those of the heroes his work immortalizes. But that requires a different argument, which I must leave for another day. A view of the *Iliad* that is similar in many ways to mine in this paper, and which almost certainly has colored every aspect of my view of the *Iliad* is given in Simone Weil's *The Iliad of Poem of Force* (trans. Mary McCarthy) originally published in the November 1945 issue of *Politics*, and reprinted in pamphlet form by Pendle Hill, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, 1956.

[3] E.g. at *Iliad* 1.244, 1.412, 16.21, 16.271, 16.274, 19.216. For a careful discussion of this description of Achilles, see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans*, Second Edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), Chapter 2, pp. 26–41.

line – indeed, the first word – of the poem sets the tone for the entire work: Homer tells us that he will tell of Achilles' *mênis* which is often translated too mildly as "anger."[4] The word really means something more like "fury" – it is the ancient Greek root for the English words "mania" and "maniac," both of which connote insanity. Book One of the *Iliad* explains the original cause of Achilles' insane fury: When Achilles helps to show how deadly divine intervention requires Agamemnon to give back Chryseis, a woman he had taken as a spoil of war, Agamemnon retaliates by taking Achilles' woman, Briseis, as a replacement for Chryseis. Naïve readers might be inclined to think that Achilles' extreme reaction is a result of his love for Briseis, but the remainder of the story shows very clearly that it is not the anguish of lost love that leads Achilles into his madness, but the wild rage of a man unjustly dishonored.[5] Achilles nearly murders Agamemnon on the spot, but he is restrained by the goddess Athena. Instead, Achilles announces not only that he will refuse to fight with his allies any longer, but also that he will remain in Troy to witness with malignant satisfaction the terrible consequences his own allies will suffer when they attempt to continue their fight without Achilles and his men. And suffer they do, with "pains a thousandfold," as Homer puts it, "hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades," the place of the afterlife.

The story of the *Iliad* is a complicated one, because one betrayal of trust and friendship –Agamemnon's unjust affront to Achilles – leads to an extraordinarily deadly retaliation, the ultimate outcome of which is that Agamemnon is indeed forced to realize his terrible error, but the cost of which is that "multitudes" of these men's innocent allies are killed unnecessarily. One is left with the strongest possible impression that this is no way to settle a dispute, and that neither of these two so-called "heroes" merits anything even close to our *moral* admiration. In achieving his revenge against Agamemnon, Achilles reveals himself to be like a madman, rejecting even the most earnest and impressive entreaties Agamemnon offers, and increasingly making decisions which are rationally indefensible, and which have deadly results to his friends. Only when his dearest friend, Patroclus, dies quite unnecessarily, as a direct consequence of Achilles' recalcitrance, does Achilles come back to his allies' side in the fighting. And even then, when he slaughters Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors, we are shown all too clearly that Achilles continues to be a man with no sense of decency or moderation. Not only

[4] Lattimore's translation of *Iliad* I.1: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus"; Fagles's translation does better, I think: "Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles."

[5] For a particularly apt discussion of this point, see Finley, p. 117.

does he kill Hector, but he then attempts to mutilate the body, dragging it around Troy again and again until at last the gods intervene and force Achilles to cease and desist. As the god, Apollo, puts it so clearly, in Book 24 of the *Iliad*, "this cursed Achilles, within whose breast there are no feelings of justice . . . has destroyed pity, and there is not in him any shame" (*Iliad* 24.39–45).

So Achilles is no hero from the moral point of view, but a man of ghastly excesses. Yet Homer again and again calls Achilles "the best of the Achaians." What lies behind such a strange evaluation?

I think the *Iliad* makes it clear that the concept of *aretê* or virtue in the earliest historical period of Greece made no specific contact with moral considerations, but measured, instead, forms of excellence in non-moral domains. The obvious – and very likely the *only* – way that Achilles stood above other men was that he was the most effective warrior. However valuable a trait this might be in war, it seems clear that Homer wanted to call his readers' attention to the limitations inherent in this notion of *aretê*. If the only – or even the main – human excellence we recognize is the excellence of a superior killer of other men, our evaluative discourse will necessarily be appallingly impoverished. The *Iliad*, in my view, is a work dedicated, at least in large part, to problematizing the most ancient concept of *aretê*, the one that tells us that one man is better than another just in case he is a more effective killer of other men. Surely, there has to be more to human value than this!

Perhaps most importantly, one finds in the *Iliad* a sharp contrast, and an incommensurability which Homer spotlights again and again in the work, between the requirements of justice and this ancient configuration of *aretê*. The ancient concept of the hero depends upon an assessment of *aretê*, but the *Iliad* could hardly make clearer the fact that such *aretê* does not guarantee that those possessing it will be just, or do what is best for society.[6] Quite the reverse, as the story of the *Iliad* and the insanity of the "best of the Achaians" makes abundantly clear, the *aretê* of killers creates

6 So Finley, p. 117: "[N]ot once did Homer or Agamemnon or Odysseus charge Achilles with anything so anachronistic as public responsibility." A.W.H. Adkins, *From the Many to the One* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 30, speaking about "The Homeric world," puts it this way: "Other qualities, such as justice and self-control, are less highly valued by this society. A wronged individual sets a high value on obtaining redress for himself; but society in general sees so much more need for the success-producing qualities of the *agathos* than for his justice and self-control that the latter are no part of his *aretê*." This, I claim, is one of the great "paradigm shifts" achieved by the Greek philosophers. See Weil, p. 15, for a similar claim about responses in later Greek thought to themes raised in Homer.

a normative basis for social chaos and an endless cycle of deadly human conflicts.[7]

One of the central problems for ancient Greek value theory, then, becomes how to align the concept of *aretê* with the requirements of justice and social order. What we find in response to this problem is that philosophers seek to adjust both of these competing norms in such a way as to try to show them to be conceptually related and thus necessary to one another. Classical Greek philosophical theories all converge on the assessment that one cannot be just without having *aretê*, and one cannot have *aretê* without being just. But in bringing the two concepts together in this way, both undergo profound modification – *aretê* becomes moralized; and justice is transformed from a social norm to being an *aretê* of human character. Plainly, in this paper I can only barely sketch the outlines of this transformation, but before I do that, I must identify what I regard as one of the other main problems of Greek ethics – the connection between *aretê* and human fulfillment.

II. *ARETÊ* AND HUMAN FULFILLMENT

If one asked a hero of Homeric epic what he took the value of *aretê* to consist in, one might reasonably expect to be told of the connections between *aretê* and the outward signs of human success – the acquisition of wealth, the esteem of other men, and the access to power and authority in society. All of these are abundantly evident as the values to which Achilles' friend, Odysseus, appeals in making his argument, in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, as to why Achilles should accept Agamemnon's appeasement, and come back to the fighting. Agamemnon not only agrees to return Briseis to Achilles, with the sworn oath that Agamemnon had never touched her – which thus both restores "undamaged" what Achilles had lost and also humiliates the virility of Agamemnon – but also offers an incredible abundance of gold, land, and other valuable goods and properties. But Odysseus does not limit his appeal to the material gains Achilles would enjoy; he goes on to promise that Achilles' allies will "honor you like a god" and hints that the greatest possible glory may be won, if Achilles should succeed in killing Hector.

Aretê wins the one who possesses and exercises it wealth, prestige, and political power. And these, the Homeric hero seems to suppose, are the

[7] See Finley, p. 118: "The *Iliad* in particular is saturated in blood, a fact which cannot be hidden or argued away, twist the evidence as none may in a vain attempt to fit archaic Greek values to a more gentle code of ethics."

constituents of the good life for a human being. The afterlife holds little promise, in this period at least (as the dismal picture of the land of the dead in Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey* makes plain), and so any value in a human life must be gained during life itself.

Much later, the philosopher Aristotle makes a claim about the human good that reveals what is, to modern readers, one of the most alien features of Greek ethical thought: "To say that *eudaimonia* is the highest good for human beings is a platitude." No word in the English language, substituted for "*eudaimonia*," will render Aristotle's claim true. Whatever *we* might suppose the highest good for human beings is – if we even suppose that there *is* such a thing – it will hardly count as a platitude, in English at least, to say that it is the highest good. I think it is fair to say that in the modern Western world, there are many competing conceptions of what the highest good for human beings is – and there are, moreover, a sizable number of philosophers and ordinary people who would simply deny that there is a single highest good for human beings. For the ancient Greeks, it seems, not only *was* there a single thing that would qualify as the highest good for human beings, but there was such a uniformity of cultural agreement in the perception of this matter that to identify what this highest good was would be to utter a platitude, to say something that everyone else would find boringly and unenlighteningly obvious. The only dispute, it seems, would be over what exactly this obvious highest good consisted in. But at least they had a word for it, and none doubted that this word picked out whatever it was that all human beings wanted, and which identified the ultimate intended object and aim of all human pursuits.

For the most ancient Greeks – the heroes in Homer's epics – on the other hand, the primary sources of value in a human life were wealth, prestige, and power, and the way to obtain these the most effectively was to be a superior human being, where the superiority was to be measured strictly in terms applicable to the activities of war. We have already seen how this conception of superiority became problematical, but a parallel line of criticism can be found emerging which attacked the ancient heroic conception of the human good. Even in Homer, we begin to find questions raised about wealth, prestige, and power as constitutive of the human good. Achilles himself, when offered all of these in staggering abundance by Agamemnon and Odysseus, rejects them summarily, on the ground that despite his having had much of each of these alleged valuables before his fight with Agamemnon, none seem to have secured for Achilles any security against Agamemnon's wrong. Wealth, and prestige, and political power are all given by other men – in Achilles' case, most of what he has already enjoyed and all that he has been promised by Odysseus will have

come from Agamemnon, his enemy. But his quarrel with Agamemnon has shown all too clearly that whatever Achilles gets from other men can also be taken away from him by other men, and Achilles' misery underscores how precarious a life is whose value is measured by these sorts of things. The psychology of the *Iliad* calls our attention to the fact that, for all of his wealth, and for all of the prestige he has among his fellow men, and for all of the power that he exercises, Achilles remains all too vulnerable to the most exquisite suffering.[8] If wealth, prestige, and power do not afford him better security against suffering than this, surely these must not be the most basic constituents of the good life. What Homer shows us is that we must seek for a good that is less precarious, and which offers more security than all that Achilles possessed. We must look for what Achilles *lacked*, which lies at the heart of his wretchedness. And since he enjoyed in abundance all that can be won from other men, what we seek and he lacked must be something more truly one's *own* than wealth, prestige, and political power.[9] What might this be?

The *Iliad* gives us a glimpse of what this might be. At the heart of Achilles' suffering is his extremism, and his complete lack of control over his emotions. When dishonored, he goes wild in his fury, which takes possession of him and his actions until the gods intervene and bring him to his senses. Only then, when he has accepted his place in the human condition, and brought his emotions under control, does he seem to gain some relief from his terrible suffering.

Later Greek writings confirm and add shape to this outline: archaic lyric poetry, early tragedy, and later, the philosophers, all agree that the best life

[8] And not just Achilles. As the author of the *Odyssey* explains it, the same is true of all of the heroes of the *Iliad*: "You remind me of the sorrow we, the irresistible sons of the Achaeans, endured in that country, all we suffered in our ships wandering over the murky sea in search of plunder wherever Achilles led us, and all the fighting round the city of Priam; there, in time, all our best men were killed. There lies warlike Ajax, there Achilles, there Patroclus, peerless counsellor, and there my own dear son, strong and noble, Antilochus, a swify runner and a brave fighter. And many other troubles we endured besides: what mortal man could tell them all?" (*Odyssey* 3: 103–114, trans. Colin Macleod). Macleod comments, "And where there is most glory, doom is most present: the greatest victors of the poem – Patroclus, Hector, and Achilles – all not only take precious lives, but are fated to lose their own soon afterwards, as Homer reminds us in their moments of triumph. In short, as the scholion on the first line of the poem succinctly puts it: 'he invented a tragic proem for a series of tragedies' " (p. 8 of "Homer on Poetry and the Poetry of Homer," in Colin Macleod, *The Collected Essays of Colin Macleod* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), pp. 1–15.

[9] A cogent account of how Achilles' story in the *Iliad* calls "heroic values" into question may be found in C. R. Beye, *Ancient Greek Literature and Society* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1975), pp. 72–74.

for a human being must come not from wealth, prestige, or political power, but from the formation of one’s own character in a way that can successfully cope with all of the ups and downs of human life – in other words, from a different kind of *aretê* – one which that Achilles, the so-called “best of the Achaians,” lacked. Achilles’ pride in his own powers and possessions left him absolutely defenseless against disappointment and setback, and often we find him depicted by Homer as if he were a helpless child, emotionally, without even the most basic strategies we all develop to cope with hardship. For all his powers and awesome superiority as a fighting man, Achilles had no strength *within himself* to call upon when things turned against him. Strong in body, Achilles was sickeningly weak in soul. His character was so weak that a single setback to his system of values sent him reeling out of control into madness and extremity. The human good, then, must be found within our own characters, and not within the external goods that come from, and can be taken away, by others.

What is severed, in later Greek writings, is not the connection between *aretê* and the human good, but the connection between the conception of the human good and what I have called the “external goods” of wealth, prestige, and power. The significance of these goods increasingly erodes, to the point that they are wholly dismissed as having any value at all by many Greek and Roman philosophers after Aristotle. And virtue or excellence, *aretê*, becomes more and more associated not with those human potentials that can win wealth, prestige, and power, but with the human characteristics that make one better able to cope with the full range of human experience. These closer connections between *aretê* and both justice and the human good appear most clearly for the first time in the philosophy of Socrates.

III. SOCRATES[10]

Our knowledge of the philosopher Socrates, the first of the three great philosophers of the classical period, is unfortunately based wholly on testimonial evidence. As far as we know, Socrates left no writings, or if he did, they have been lost. On the other hand, there is general scholarly consensus that the philosophy of the historical Socrates is probably preserved in a more or less reliable way in the writings of Plato’s earliest period, and in what I say in this paper, I shall assume that this is true.

[10] My own interpretation of Socrates’ view of the unity of the virtues may be found in Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, “Socrates and the Unity of the Virtues,” *The Journal of Ethics* 1 (1997), pp. 311–324.

Socrates' answer to the ancient problem of the potential for conflict between *aretê* and justice was to redefine justice in such a way as to make it one of the several virtues or excellences. We find Socrates making this claim in several of Plato's early works. In the first book of Plato's *Republic*, we find Socrates proclaiming that justice is that excellence of the soul by which we live well and prosper. And in Plato's *Gorgias*, we learn that Socrates argued that those who are unjust and socially destructive actually act in opposition to their own best interest. Both claims are represented in the dialogues as highly controversial ones.

In the Book I of the *Republic*, Plato depicts Socrates in a debate with a series of other men, the last and most extreme of whom is Thrasymachus, who argues that justice is *not* any form of human excellence, but is actually instead the product of human weakness, useless to and shunned by those of power and influence. The best life for human beings, Thrasymachus proclaims, is a life of unbridled excesses and *injustices*, which one is powerful or clever enough to engage in without fear of punishment. The man of natural *aretê*, for Thrasymachus, is much like the hero of Homeric epic – he is either too clever to be detected in his injustices, or simply too strong to be opposed in them. At the heart of Thrasymachus's conception of justice is his assumption that injustice is more likely than justice to win those clever or powerful enough to escape punishment, the greatest share of what I have called the external goods of wealth, prestige, and power. In this, too, Thrasymachus accepts the most ancient view of value we found in Homer.

Against these ancient conceptions of the incompatibility of justice and *aretê*, and of the nature of the human good, Socrates offers very different conceptions. Rather than conceiving of justice as a set of social conventions which are articulated and enforced by and for the sake of society as a whole, Socrates counts justice as that excellence or *aretê* by which any human being will lead the sort of life that will maximize his or her own greatest good. This internalization of justice has extremely important consequences on all later conceptions until after the Christianization of the West. The inclusion of justice within the human virtues requires that we reconfigure our analysis of the concept of justice from one focused on fundamental rules or codes of behavior, requiring or proscribing certain sorts of actions, to understanding justice as that feature of human character that would naturally produce or yield certain actions, and would prevent others. The social aspect of justice thus became not the central feature of the analysis, but rather only a symptom of the *aretê* possessed by the individual, such that just action was now to be understood only as the sort of action a just person might perform in the relevant circumstances.

Socrates advertises this new conception of justice by showing the inherent weaknesses in the more traditional conceptions, which Plato puts in the mouths of Socrates' opponents in the discussion. Rule-based conceptions, for example, that justice consists in such actions as telling the truth and paying back debts, as Socrates' first interlocutor in the *Republic*, Cephalus, puts it, are defective because in certain circumstances justice will require violating any such rules – for example, when one refuses to tell the truth to a madman, or to return a debt to one who would use what is returned in socially unacceptable ways. Reconceiving justice as an *aretê* of character allows Socrates to explain what is common between the cases when one *should* and when one *should not* tell the truth or return a debt.

But perhaps the greatest strength of this new account of justice as an *aretê* of character is that it allows Socrates to secure the connection that even Thrasymachus never doubted, between human excellence and the human good. But Socrates also plainly has a radically different conception of the human good than Thrasymachus does. Wealth, prestige, and power all count for little, to Socrates. His disparagement of these as the constituents of human value is nowhere clearer than in Plato's *Gorgias*, where we find Socrates stunning his interlocutor, a young man named Polus, by claiming that even a complete dictator, who can enact his every whim, will be wretched and, in reality, powerless – when measured by his own ability to achieve what he most desires – unless he is just. Polus finds Socrates' claims astonishing because, like Thrasymachus, he is convinced by the ancient view that the human good consists in wealth, prestige, and political power – all of which the dictator would have in unexceeded abundance. But Socrates confounds Polus by first getting him to admit that we all desire only one thing, and do all else we do with an eye to this one thing, namely, our own benefit. The powers of a dictator, Socrates says, do not necessarily bring him any important advantage, because all they do is enable him to gain what he *thinks* is best for him – but, of course, if what he *thinks* is best for him is not *really* what is best for him, then all of his alleged advantages only make it easier for him to do what will actually *frustrate* his real desire for benefit. Insofar as the dictator errs in his conception of what benefit truly consists in, he will be the most wretched and least benefitted of all people, since others with similarly mistaken values will be less able to act on them and so less able to pursue their own (unwitting) detriment, and those with more intelligent values will automatically pursue the right things, even if they have fewer powers to employ.

According to Socrates, the intelligent person would conceive of himself or herself as a combination of body and soul. As health is the main good of the body, so there must be some main good of the soul. And since, for

Socrates, the good of the soul is far more important to the overall well-being of the person than the good of the body, whatever the main good of the soul might be, it is to be valued over and above even health – a good that no one would risk, even for wealth, prestige, and political power. This special good of the soul, he argues, turns out to be none other than justice. Accordingly, the unjust dictator, when measured by his own acquisition of the benefit he really desires, turns out paradoxically to be the least powerful and most miserable of all human beings. So it is that Socrates turns the ancient conceptions of *aretê* and the human good on their heads.

But exactly *how* does Socrates argue for the connection between justice, the excellence of the soul, and the human good? Surprisingly, he does it by appealing to a feature inherent in the ancient conceptions. Justice, it had always been thought, was to be understood as a kind of ordering and harmonizing force. It is easy enough to see how this applies within the social conception of justice. But Socrates argues that there can be no more important ordering and harmonizing that what we do within ourselves, as we seek to eliminate conflicts within our beliefs, motivations, and values. Justice, he suggests, must necessarily then be what it is that accomplishes this ordering and harmonizing of the *self*, before all else. All of one's external actions – insofar as they are just – must be just precisely as a reflection and extension of this inner harmony and order. Justice, then, is essentially this harmonizing and ordering of the self, and the one who is so harmonized and ordered will be the one who has achieved this most important *aretê*. And because the condition of lacking inner harmony and order is even worse than the disharmony and disorder of the body – disease – those who lack the *aretê* of justice will be the most miserable of human beings, no matter how great their wealth, their prestige, or their political power.

For Socrates, the way to obtain this harmony and order of the self was to engage in a relentless and lifelong intellectual undertaking. He thought the undertaking must be intellectual, because he believed that we would always pursue only what we *believed* was best for us. Hence, when we err in our pursuit of the good life, our error must somehow be the result of some one or more faulty cognitions – the error must lie in some false belief or beliefs we held about what actual things or actions in the world would best bring us the benefit we sought. One result of Socrates' intellectualist conception of the pursuit of the good life that later philosophers found unacceptable was that it forced Socrates to deny the reality of the phenomenon of moral weakness where one pursues something that one recognizes is not actually good for one. The error in such cases seems not to lie in a cognitive failure, as Socrates claimed, since one does not

fail to recognize that what one does or pursues is bad for one. The Socratic conception of motivation, hence, was complicated by later writers, in order to account for the phenomenon of weakness.

One other problem in Socrates' account is that it made it difficult for Socrates to distinguish the various virtues from one another. In his view, they were all essentially the same, to be understood in intellectualist terms as a kind of knowledge – the knowledge that would allow us always to form and maintain the *right* cognitions in each case, and, hence, never to err in pursuing benefit. But Socrates also seemed to realize that although there were close conceptual relationships between the virtues, it is implausible to suppose that a given moral action could indifferently be identified as pious or courageous, for example. So there must also be some way to distinguish the several virtues from one another, and he sometimes seems to have argued that some virtues were only proper parts of the whole of virtue, or even parts of other virtues, whereas in other places, he seems to argue that nothing distinguishes any one virtue from any of the others. Some scholars have gone so far as to argue that Socrates simply never managed to come to a coherent decision on this issue, and whether or not this is true, it is quite obvious that later Greek philosophers disavowed Socrates' radically intellectualistic conception of virtue and these consequences of it.

IV. PLATO

For the most part, Plato accepted the Socratic innovations, including, most of all, Socrates' conception of justice as an *aretê* of character and his idea that only justice could secure the human good. If anything, Plato takes the Socratic disdain for wealth, prestige, and power to even further extremes.

These Socratic tendencies are plainest in the way Plato develops his ideal state in the *Republic*. Plato's ideal political rulers will be philosophers, and will be unconcerned with wealth and prestige, which will be primarily allocated to the lower classes of artisans and warriors, respectively. But not only will wealth and prestige not concern Plato's philosopher-rulers, they will also paradoxically disdain political power, even though this will be wielded in the state by none but them. No other life, Plato proclaims, "looks with scorn on political office except the life of true philosophers" (521b). Political power, then, will be wielded only as a duty owed to the state, and only because a failure to do so would be unjust, and hence unacceptable to those who would recognize that injustice is something even more intolerable than the political offices they scorn, but must grudgingly provide.

Plato's special innovation, where he breaks company from his master, Socrates, comes in his more complicated conception of the human psyche, and thus of human motivation. Plato thinks that there are three distinct psychological elements, each with a distinct sort of motivation. Benefit – the only object desired in Socratic philosophy – is in Plato's view the desired object of *reason*, which Plato locates in a part of the soul he calls the rational part. *Honor* and *prestige* and such goals are independently desired by a part of the soul Plato identifies as the emotional, passionate, or spirited part. Finally, our desires for food, drink, sex, and pleasure in general, Plato recognizes as the objectives of what he calls the appetitive part of the soul. Our incommensurable interests in all of these things, for example, benefit, honor, and pleasure, can create psychic conflicts, according to Plato, and different people will be found to have different tendencies to prioritize such interests.

Justice, in Plato's view, will be what orders and harmonizes the soul in such a way as to insure that all of our interests can be pursued in the right measure, so that none of our distinct desires will frustrate the others. In the just person, according to Plato, the rational part of the soul will always predominate, so that every decision will be made with an eye to benefit, even as it also acknowledges and indulges other desires. But Plato's account of psychic harmony and order implicitly recognizes the possibility of moral weakness – for the lower parts of the soul can overwhelm one's reason and compel one to pursuits that are against one's better (rational) judgment. In this, Plato preserves the innovations of the Socratic account of virtue, but rejects what he regards as the too-simplistic Socratic account of motivation.

Plato's conception of social justice is modeled explicitly after his conception of justice as an *aretê* of character. As justice in the individual character is a balancing of the potentially conflicting interests of the different parts of the soul, so justice in the state is a balancing of the potentially conflicting interests of different parts of the state – parts which are also characterized in direct association to the different motivations of the parts of the soul. Plato argues that there are three different sorts of people, whose motivational tendencies tend to follow those of the different parts of the soul. Those who are likely to have their appetitive desires predominate, Plato assigns in his ideal state to the class of artisans, whose principal *aretê* will be temperance precisely because appetitive drives are the ones most likely to drive us into intemperate activities. Their special virtue will be assured by controlling their access to the excesses to which they might tend. Their lust for wealth will drive them to work, but the economy will be controlled to prevent them from amassing more than is good for them.

Most of all, they will be wholly disenfranchised from political activities in the city. Those whose motivations will tend to favor the drive for honor and prestige, Plato assigns to the warrior class, which will be empowered to defend the city and thus win glory and fame among its citizens much as the Homeric heroes did. And those whose interest tends most of all to benefit will be assigned the role of ruling the state, since they can be the most trusted to follow their reason and to pursue what is best for the state. The special *aretê* of each class, and of the city as a whole, will conform exactly to the distinct virtues of the citizens and those of the various parts of the soul – temperance, among the appetitive artisans, a virtue pertinent to one's control over one's appetites; courage, among the warriors, a virtue pertinent to one's emotions and passions; wisdom, among the rulers, a virtue of reason and deliberation about benefit; and justice, as the ordering principle of the entire state and its distinct parts, as well as of the soul and its distinct parts.

In Plato's account, we also see more clearly how the various virtues are related, not just to justice, but also to one another. Plato agrees with Socrates that one who has wisdom – the special virtue of the rational part of the soul – will have all of the virtues, precisely because when the rational part of the soul functions virtuously, it will impose on the rest of the soul the harmony and order that constitutes justice in the soul, and thus will ensure that the soul is also courageous and temperate. But the unity of the virtues one finds in Plato is a *causal effect* of the rational virtue rather than the logical consequence of the identity of the several virtues. The virtues remain conceptually distinct, and are accounted for in connection with distinct features of the human psyche. In Socrates, recall, all virtue was intellectual virtue. For Plato, intellectual virtue is central, but not all virtue is intellectual: some virtue is appetitive, and some emotional.

Plato goes considerably beyond Socrates, however, in associating virtue with the pursuit of the good life. Socrates seemed to allow that even virtue might not be sufficient absolutely to secure a good life for a human being – although a virtuous character would indemnify the one having it against moral error, Socrates apparently recognized that the human condition was still precarious, and circumstances out of one's control could make one miserable even if one was morally blameless. In Plato's account, however, this changed. The argument of the *Republic* has the consequence that the virtuous will always be happy, no matter what ill fortune may otherwise befall them. This result flows from Plato's exclusive emphasis on the soul, and his highly ascetic disregard for the body. As long as one is just, Plato proclaims, one will have a good and happy life.

V. ARISTOTLE

Like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle conceives justice to be a kind of virtue; also like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle regards virtue – and therefore justice – to be the best way to pursue the human good. But Aristotle rejects the Platonic confidence that justice is sufficient for a good and happy life, and also seems less certain that the virtues can be supposed all to flow from a single source, either conceptually, as Socrates supposed, or causally, as Plato claimed. Moreover, Aristotle argues that neither Socrates nor Plato account adequately for the *variety* of virtues. Socrates seems to have recognized no more than five virtues; Plato, only four. In Aristotle, we find dozens of virtues, each with a distinct analysis, and we find different virtues appropriate to different sorts of people. For Aristotle, there is no unity of the virtues; indeed, wholly different virtues apply, in his view, to men and women – a claim expressly denied by both Socrates and Plato.

By far the most numerous virtues are those that Aristotle calls "ethical," that is, those that have to do with actions or emotions. These virtues, Aristotle admits, would seem all to fall under the general category of justice, and so – as Plato had also done – Aristotle regards justice not only as a virtue, but as a kind of generic form of all of the ethical virtues. However, Aristotle distinguished ethical from intellectual virtue, and did not put intellectual virtue under the genus of justice, but rather under wisdom, as a separate genus. I will say more about this distinction momently.

In Aristotle's account in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, virtue is to be understood as the mean between the extremes of two distinct vices: one of deficiency, and one of excess. Hence, courage is the mean between the deficiency of cowardice and the excess of bravado; wittiness is the mean between the deficiency of boorishness and the excess of buffoonery, and so on. Only in a few cases do we find that vices are simple opposites to their virtues, as for example with shamelessness, spite, and envy (in emotions), and theft, murder, and adultery (in actions). All other cases of virtue and vice position the virtue at the mean between two extreme vices.

Human virtue, for Aristotle, is the product of a fulfillment of what is the distinct function of human beings. According to his biological account, human beings are within the genus, animal, and are differentiated from other animals into a distinct species by their possession of rationality. So, as Socrates and Plato had before him, Aristotle finds an essential role, in his account of virtue, for rationality. Virtue is a form of rationality, since it is only by reason that we can locate the proper mean. Moreover, as Socrates and Plato also had agreed, virtue is connected to the human good as the best – indeed, the only – way to secure what we most desire. It is in

this connection that he claims that it is a platitude to identify *eudaimonia* as the highest good for human beings. But what precisely, he asks, does *eudaimonia* consist in? To find the answer, he insists that the highest good must be *final*, such that we seek other things for the sake of it, but do not seek it for the sake of any further good; it must be *distinctly human*, so that it is a highest good for human beings only, and no other species of animal; and it must be *self-sufficient*, that is, the sort of thing that, once possessed by a human being, it can only be lost through the most extreme of disasters, and not by any of the normal upsets or losses which are common to human life.

The first of these conditions, Aristotle's insistence that the good must be final, rules out one of the goods regarded as primary in the most ancient accounts, namely, wealth. Wealth, claims Aristotle, is not a final good, and is not desired strictly for its own sake, but only for its uses. Hence, we use wealth to pursue further, more final goods. The second condition, that the good must be distinctly human, rules out pleasure, which is a final good, but one that we share with animals. The best life will be one that is indeed a pleasant one (since we are animals, pleasure must be included in the best life), but pleasure cannot be the distinctly human good we mean to identify by talking about "happiness." The third condition, self-sufficiency, rules out the other goods so treasured by Homer's heroes – prestige and power – since these are only given in relation to and by other human beings, who can take them away just as easily as they bestow them – recall Achilles' complaint about such things in the *Iliad*. It should now be clear, as well, why "happiness" is such a bad translation for what Aristotle takes to meet all three conditions: Happiness may be a final end, but it seems unlikely that it is something unique to human beings, and it seems too fleeting and unstable to be self-sufficient. In the end, Aristotle conceives of the highest human good as being activity in conformity with the rational principle that is virtue, or the several virtues. And the best such activity, he claims, transcends the merely ethical virtues, though it has such virtues as necessary conditions; for a human being, the most complete rational activity, and hence the most complete human good, can be achieved only by living in such a way as to realize in the fullest way the virtues of the rational intellect itself, by engaging in theoretical activity and achieving wisdom.

VI. CONCLUSION

I have tried in this sketch to show how the Greek philosophers responded to certain of the ethical problems first articulated in pre-philosophical works. Two problems in particular presented themselves: human excellence or

virtue, as it was conceived in the earliest Greek literature, seemed potentially to conflict with the requirements of justice, which was conceived as wholly behavioral and social in nature, and what was conceived as the human good to be won by virtue appeared to be too insecure and unreliable to provide an adequate account of what could make a human life maximally worthy. These problems were solved in Greek philosophy by converting justice into a quality of individual human character, rather than embodied simply in terms of social behaviors, and by exchanging the ancient conception of the human good into a predominantly psychological characteristic, where human reason was to be regarded as a primary constituent. The philosophers themselves disagreed about many other issues – about moral weakness, about the number and variety of the virtues, and about the relationships between the virtues – but their answers to what I have called the ancient problems were all essentially the same. Given their unanimity on these issues, it is interesting to note that their agreements were not preserved after the Christianizing of the West. In the Christian West, perhaps relying on the Judaic tradition of rules and commandments and the models provided by the Christian martyrs, ethical thought has returned to conceptions of justice in terms of behavioral rules, and Western philosophy has become suspicious of claims that connect proper conduct to any benefits that might be enjoyed by good people. It is not clear to me, at least, that the West's abandonment of Greek philosophical ethics – or our separation of morality from the goal of living well – has yielded a richer or more adequate moral life. Even less clear to me is how our later moral views could answer the problems identified so vividly in Homer.

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