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The Hellenistic Ideal of the Good or Virtuous Life

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December 2012

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INTRODUCTION

In studying the history of different civilizations it is easy to begin in medias res, in the middle of things, without taking stock of what came before and influenced a particular period and without acknowledging the influences it had on what came after. Both are vital to gaining an understanding of what was going on in the past. It can be tempting to take single events, analyze them, and put forth an idea as to why things seemed to be certain ways. Without the whole picture, however, this can be misleading. That is why it is important to step back and look at a larger view of things.

The history of ancient Greece spans an extremely large amount of time, from the before the Heroic Age all the way down to the Hellenistic Age and beyond; this span of roughly eight hundred years, not including the Dark Age of Greece and the Archaic Period, does not intentionally leave out the prehistoric age that came before this and the initial immigration to the Achaean Peninsula nor the ages that came after. This paper is going to examine one aspect of that time: the Hellenistic ideal of the good or virtuous life. To do this, it will discuss the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, two preeminent fifth century philosophers whose ideas shaped the thoughts of many who came after them. In addition to this, it will also look at how the introduction of their ideas affects Greek literature. Before this can be done, however, it is necessary to look at what was going on in the Greek world before they entered the scene.

Myth, and often heroic myth, played an important role in antiquity, sometimes making it difficult to separate it from history. "Obscurity still hides the origins of the myths

of gods and heroes and the elaboration into connected sagas.”¹ The myths themselves come to represent a mingling of stories of legend with actual history, making it difficult to distinguish the two. These are presented in many different forms, all of which lend a great diversity to the transmission of Greek myth and history.

Being the Heroic Age, the hero is necessarily the central figure and as such it is important to examine what was expected of him. The hero is a figure in whom all actions and passions are carried to the extreme, “what is ideal in him lies in the beauty and freshness he embodies. He is not haunted by nobility of soul, aspirations to dignity or moral perfection; he represents the wholly unspoiled, spontaneous egoism of human nature, unrepentant but greathearted and benign.”² The hero, therefore, is a person who is able to fully magnify the ideal qualities of mankind. Having said this, it is also important to note that these qualities are not diminished when a hero performs an apparent misdeed. Odysseus and Diomedes, after all, kill Dolon after he has given them useful information about the lay out of Troy despite promises to the contrary and their heroic status is not diminished. Therefore it can be said that horrible deeds are not the result of wickedness or cruelty and sometimes can even be just and praiseworthy.³

Two of the most important aspects of the heroic character are embodied by Odysseus and Achilles. Despite all his faults, Achilles has strength and a “greatness of soul.” Knowing full well that his life will be cut short, he still “faces his death with sublime tranquility.”⁴ Odysseus is the embodiment of cunning, which can sometimes be pushed

¹ Jacob Burckhard, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 1998), 140.

² Ibid 140.

³ Ibid 141.

⁴ Ibid 141.

into the realm of deceit but he is nevertheless praised for his craftiness. The Greeks look to the heroes of the Heroic Age as men of greater physical strength and stature and “[a]lthough the age is by no means a golden one, and in spite of the predominance of evil and ill fortune, still the heroic existence is pervaded by the ideal. Other nations will always envy one whose normal picture of the imagined past resembles the world of Homer.”⁵

In contrast to the great heroes of Homer, an entirely different view is given in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*. “Alongside the heroes and their descendants we are here shown a people of peasant stock” where property is the most important thing and good neighbors are sometimes more important than family.⁶ The landscape presented by Hesiod is rustic and homely, directly in contrast to the grand adventures and actions of Homer’s epics.

Now to skip ahead to the fifth century. While this is a very abbreviated discussion of all that was happening during this time in Greece, it should be noted that it discusses issues that are of importance to the topic of this paper. One of the more important aspects that comes from this time is rhetoric, and from many different examples “what emerges is the passionate common will that drive these people on.”⁷ The Greeks, with passion as their driving force, were not always in control of decisions that were made but despite this were able to achieve astonishing results. It is possible that this rashness in decision-making, being driven by passion rather than reason, is what inspired Plato to posit that reason is the foundation for a virtuous life.

The next thing that happens is the rise of Sophist thought. While the introduction of a new philosophy may not seem entirely unusual or important, since new ideas were often

⁵ Ibid 146.

⁶ Ibid 158.

⁷ Ibid 226.

being put forth and discussed, the Sophists advance philosophical thought from focusing on the study of nature to the study of human beings. "Instead of debating alternative theories of nature, philosophers now addressed the problem of human knowledge, asking whether it was possible to discover any universal truth."⁸ Under the influence of these questions, the focus of moral thought begins to change. The myth, and the power of the gods, begins to lose hold on how people direct their lives and the desire to answer what is the "good" begins to take precedence.

PART ONE: THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

One of the problems that philosophers have been puzzling over for years is the question of what actually constitutes a good life. Is it to pursue physical pleasures with no thought to anything else? Or is it to only pursue spiritual or intellectual growth through the pursuit of knowledge? Is the good life somewhere in between the two extremes? A discussion of the good or virtuous life cannot be complete without a conversation about what, exactly, constitutes "the good" and why people desire it. Various philosophers have provided many answers to these questions, but none of them are exactly the same. This paper is seeking to discern the Hellenistic ideals of the good life.

This section of the paper will look at how Plato and Aristotle view the good life by examining their writings and comparing ideas of the two philosophers. Plato expresses in the *Gorgias* the idea that people desire the actual good instead of the apparent good. He also gives voice to the idea that the good life consists in being content with what one has and not continuously seeking pleasure. In the *Protagoras*, Plato expresses the idea that

⁸ Samuel Enoch Stumpf and James Fieser, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 2008), 26.

virtue, as a knowledge, must be measurable in some way that is not deceptive, or in a way that shows things how they really are. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* expresses the idea that virtue is central to a well-lived life through what he terms habituation, possibly better understood as character; the mean, understood not as a kind of quantitative mediocrity, but rather as a qualitative equilibrium of restraint and desire; and the noble, from the Greek word *καλον* which is better translated as 'beautiful.' This section is going to examine how each philosopher treats the good or virtuous life, noting where Plato and Aristotle express similar and contrasting points of view.

PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

The *Gorgias* is an early transitional dialogue that discusses what is good and right by trying to figure out what justice is and what a just action entails. Socrates engages the orator Gorgias in a conversation about the art of persuading people on the nature of things. Gorgias bows out when Socrates gets him to admit that a truly skilled orator must have true knowledge about which he is persuading people. The young rhetorician Polus, who strongly believes in the power rhetoric gives the orator, steps in. He is unable to counter Socrates' statement that it is better to suffer injustice than to do it and steps down as well. For the remainder of the dialogue Socrates engages Callicles in a debate about the nature of the good life and what kind of life is best to live.⁹

The first section this paper is going to look at is Socrates' discussion with Polus about why people do things. He asks Polus, "[d]o you think that when people do

⁹ John M. Cooper, introduction to *Gorgias*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), 791-792.

something, they want the thing they're doing at the time, or the thing for the sake of which they do what they're doing?"¹⁰ Socrates is trying to get Polus to see that people do things for the outcome, not for the thing itself. People take medicine to be healthy, work long hours to be rich, and any other thing a person does for the sake of something else. These things are not done for themselves, but are instead done out of the desire for their expected result. Socrates then goes on to say that all things must be good, bad or somewhere in between. Polus agrees that one does not do something good for an intermediate thing, so Socrates says, "it's for the sake of what's good that those who do all these things do them."¹¹

Typically, philosophers say a person desires the apparent good, what seems good to the person, but Socrates seems to think people desire the actual good and therefore all actions are done for the sake of the real good. "[W]hat one desires as one's end is one's real happiness, even if that differs from what one thinks it is."¹² Admittedly this sounds almost absurd. How can Spenser be said to desire real happiness when he does things that are clearly not in his interest, like smoking? Terry Penner offers several different explanations for defending this idea. Penner claims that someone desiring as his final end his real good¹³

¹⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, trans John M. Cooper, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), 467c.

¹¹ Ibid, 468b.

¹² Terry Penner & C. J. Rowe, "The Desire for Good: Is the 'Meno' Inconsistent with the 'Gorgias'?" *Phronesis* 39, no. 1 (1994): 5.

¹³ Penner's argument (found in "The Desire for Good" is as follows.

(E1)[Spenser] desires, as [his] final end, the maximizing of bodily pleasure ([his] apparent good),

is that

(E2)[Spenser] (falsely) believes that the life of maximizing bodily pleasure is, in [his] case, [his] real good?

But then, to get (E1) by a substitution using (E2), shouldn't we have that

(E3) [Spenser] desires, as [his] final end, [his] real good?

It is true that moderns will hope to get (E1) from (E2) plus (E3) understood as (E3a) [Spenser] desires as [his] end (what [he] thinks of as) [his] real good.

can be understood instrumentally, meaning Spenser can desire smoking as a means to his real happiness, “treating any case of desiring some apparent happiness which is not identical with real happiness, as a case of desiring something as an (ingredient) means rather than as an end.”¹⁴

Using this argument is meant to make sense of Socrates’ claim that all actions are done for the actual good. In other words, when we act in ways that harm us, we do so seeking our ultimate happiness, but mistakenly believing that the action will lead us to our ultimate happiness. Therefore, if a person does an action that does not result in maximizing actual happiness the person did not truly want to do that action. Penner says that the view that “the identity of a given particular action is fixed by all the particular properties the action actually has, including the consequences that action has; it is not fixed by particular descriptions under which the agent does it”¹⁵ must be attributed to Socrates. This means that the identity of an action is determined not only by its description, like gambling or eating ice cream, but also by its consequences, losing everything or gaining lots of weight. It must be said, therefore, that Spenser does an action, seeking to maximize bodily pleasure, mistakenly thinking it will lead to his real happiness because he is not thinking of the long-term consequences of his actions. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates posits the idea of the art of measuring which would help Spenser correctly measure, or determine, which actions would actually lead to true happiness.

rather than as
(E3b) [Spenser] desires as [his] end [his] real good ([his] real happiness), even if it is different from what [he] thinks it is.

¹⁴ Ibid, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.

One last thing Terry Penner points out is the ideas that “virtue is knowledge and vice ignorance” and “no one errs willingly” are commonly attributed to Socrates. His point being that while people are not ethically different in desires they are different in what knowledge they possess. Penner argues that this position “could not be the view that we are all the same ethically in that we desire our apparent good. For our apparent goods do differ... and make us differ in the quality of our desires. It is only if desire for good... is desire for the real good, that it will be the case that the good do not differ from the bad in their desires but only in their intellect.”¹⁶ The section of the *Gorgias* where Socrates is discussing with Polus why people do things highlights this. While talking to Polus about why people do things Socrates says

[w]hen you call all admirable things admirable, bodies, for example, or colors, shapes and sounds, or practices, is it with nothing in view that you do so each time? Take admirable bodies first. Don't you call them admirable either in virtue of their usefulness, relative to whatever it is that each is useful for, or else in virtue of some pleasure, if it makes the people who look at them get enjoyment from looking at them? ... Doesn't the same hold for all the other things? ... [C]ertainly things that pertain to laws and practices—the admirable ones, that is—don't fall outside the limits of being either pleasant or beneficial, or both, I take it.¹⁷

He is trying to show that it is the understanding of these admirable things that differs from person to person and not the actual goodness of an object or action. Therefore, Spenser

¹⁶ Ibid, 18.

¹⁷ “Gorgias,” 474d-e.

desires the actual good, but it is his understanding, or lack of understanding, that causes him to do things that are actually only apparent goods.

Socrates claim that people do things for the sake of the real good is essential for understanding what his idea of the good life is.

After speaking with Polus about the good, Socrates' engages in an argument with Callicles concerning pleasure. Callicles seems to view the life of pleasure as the life of seeking to maximize pleasure. He says "that the man who'll live correctly ought to allow his own appetites to get as large as possible and not restrain them. And when they are as large as possible, he ought to be competent to devote himself to them by virtue of his bravery and intelligence, and to fill them with whatever he may have an appetite for at that time."¹⁸ Callicles is clearly advocating hedonism, believing the best life is the life of maximum pleasure. He connects his version of hedonism to an Homeric view of virtue by upholding the specific values of strength, like the strength of Achilles, and intelligence, like that of Odysseus. The few who possess those character traits will be most capable of maximizing the life of pleasure. He also believes that those who are not able to pursue a life of maximizing pleasure try to say such a life is shameful and undisciplined.

[T]his isn't possible for the many, I believe; hence, they become detractors of people like this because of the shame they feel, while they conceal their own impotence. And they say that lack of discipline is shameful, as I was saying earlier, and so they enslave men who are better by nature, and while they themselves lack the ability to provide

¹⁸ Ibid, 491e-492.

for themselves fulfillment for their pleasures, their own lack of courage leads them to praise self-control and justice.¹⁹

Callicles believes the majority of people (there are only a few Homeric heroes after all) are not able to truly pursue what he considers the good life.

Socrates, on the other hand, seems to hold to the view that the good life is the life of the self-controlled and disciplined person. In other words, it is to be content with what one has and not constantly seeking pleasure. He then gives Callicles what is commonly referred to as the “jar example.” There are two men, both with jars that contain resources such as wine, milk, honey and other things that are scarce and somewhat difficult to come by. One man has jars that are full and sound, and he does not have to worry about his jars. The second man, on the other hand, has jars that are leaky and rotten. He is constantly having to worry about keeping them filled and is not able to rest. “Now since each life is the way I described it, are you saying that the life of the undisciplined man is happier than that of the orderly man?”²⁰ It is clear that Socrates believes the life of the man who does not have to always worry about seeking to maximize pleasure is the best life.

Callicles responds by saying that the “man who has filled himself up has no pleasure any more, and when he’s been filled up and experiences neither joy nor pain, that’s living like a stone... Rather, living pleasantly consists in this: having as much as possible flow in.”²¹ He clearly thinks Socrates has it all wrong. Callicles believes that the good life cannot consist of being “filled” up for that means one can no longer experience life. Socrates questions Callicles once more by saying, “surely the good isn’t just unrestricted

¹⁹ Ibid, 492a-b.

²⁰ Ibid, 493d-494a.

²¹ Ibid, 494b.

enjoyment”²² because if that were the case there are many shameful things, such as bad pleasures (or apparently good things) that would follow from a life of unrestricted pleasure seeking. It seems that Socrates thinks Callicles’ idea of the good life can be equated to the life of an addict. Take a person who is addicted to oxycodone, cocaine or any other substance, illegal or otherwise. The addict only finds pleasure in constantly having more of his drug of choice, incorrectly, according to Socrates, thinking that obtaining and using more of the drug will make him happy. If the addict is unable to find more of the drug, he starts experiencing painful withdrawals. Socrates wants to say that constantly seeking to fill up one’s jars, or the life of constantly seeking pleasure, would cause unspeakable agony due to the constant replenishing required to stay happy. To which Callicles can only reply that is Socrates’ opinion. We can now shed light on this by utilizing Penner’s analysis. Both Socrates and Callicles genuinely desire true happiness. Callicles thinks that a life of maximizing pleasure is the most adequate means to achieving happiness. Socrates on the other hand, thinks that the life of contentment with life, and thus detachment from desire, is the most adequate means to achieve happiness.

PLATO’S *PROTAGORAS*

The *Protagoras* is an early Socratic dialogue that is primarily concerned with the question of whether or not virtue is teachable. Protagoras is a sophist, or an educator, who claims he is able to teach young men deliberation and citizenship. Socrates considers these to be virtues and wonders if it is actually possible for them to be taught, and if they can, how someone like Protagoras can claim to teach these virtues. Protagoras identifies

²² Ibid, 495b.

several virtues and holds to the popular view of the time that none of these virtues, especially courage, should be thought of as knowledge, or wisdom. However, if this were the case, how would it be possible for virtue to be teachable? Socrates, in contrast, tries to show that courage, and the other virtues, encompass wisdom and, therefore, how can they not be taught?²³

Just as in the *Gorgias*, Socrates engages in another discussion of the good life. Near the end of the dialogue, he asks Protagoras to help him figure out how to distinguish a good life from a bad one. “[I]f he contemplated his life, having lived pleasantly, does he not seem to you to have lived well?” and when Protagoras agrees, Socrates continues “[s]o, then, to live pleasantly is good, and unpleasantly, bad?”²⁴ This appears to be a different stance than the one Socrates takes in the *Gorgias*. As we have seen, in that dialogue Socrates denies hedonism, or the idea that the human good is pleasure. But in the *Protagoras*, Socrates seems to be defending hedonism. When Protagoras replies that a pleasant life must be spent in pursuit of pleasure in honorable things, Socrates seems astounded that he would say deny that all pleasures are good and all painful things are bad.

It is only natural that this leads into a discussion on what makes something good or bad. The common view of the time was that something was good as long as it brought pleasure and bad if it brought pain. Socrates seems to accept this when he says bad things “are bad on account of nothing other than the fact that they result in pain and deprive us of other pleasures” and good things “are good only because they result in pleasure and in the

²³ John M. Cooper, introduction to *Protagoras*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), 746-747.

²⁴ Plato, *Protagoras*, trans John M. Cooper, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), 351b.

relief and avoidance of pain.”²⁵ This, of course, is in reference not to the immediate effects of the good or bad thing, but to what happens later. Eating an excessive amount of sugary sweets now might bring immediate pleasure, but will later cause one to gain lots of weight. Socrates then points out how absurd it is to say a man, knowing the good to be good, still does the bad on account of the immediate (and not the long term) effects of pleasure. A man

knowing the bad to be bad, nevertheless does that very thing, when he is able not to do it, having been driven and overwhelmed by pleasure; and again when you say that a man knowing the good is not willing to do it, on account of immediate pleasure, having been overcome by it. Just how absurd this is will become very clear.²⁶

If hedonism is true and the good is equated with pleasure, it does not make sense to say being overcome with pleasure, or the good, is bad.

On that basis, then, let us say that a man knowing bad things to be bad, does them all the same. If then someone asks us: ‘Why?’ ‘Having been overcome,’ we shall reply. ‘By what?’ he will ask us. We are no longer able to say ‘by pleasure,’—for it has taken on its other name, ‘the good’—so we will say and reply... ‘By the good,’... If by chance the questioner is rude he might burst out laughing and say: ‘What you’re saying is ridiculous—someone does what is bad,

²⁵ Ibid, 535d-354b.

²⁶ Ibid, 355b.

knowing that it is bad, when it is not necessary to do it, having been overcome by the good.'²⁷

It is absurd to say that someone is overcome by pleasure if it is equated with the good. If a person is overcome by the pleasure, or good, that comes from doing something bad (such as eating junk food), it is, for Socrates, absurd to say he did a bad thing (eating junk) because he was overcome by the good. Even though fruits and vegetables might not bring about the same immediate pleasure as candy and potato chips, they result in more enduring pleasure, that being the health of an individual. Socrates thinks it is unreasonable to ignore the long-term benefits of an action simply because the short-term results appear to bring about more pleasure.

Socrates then continues to say a person weighs the level of good and bad in each action, and himself. It is from this that Socrates posits the importance of being able to 'measure' the truth of each action. We must be able to look past the appearance of a good or bad thing and see how these things actually are.

If then our well-being depended upon this, doing and choosing large things [the good], avoiding and not doing the small ones [the bad], what would we see as our salvation in life? Would it be the art of measurement or the power of appearance? While the power of appearance often makes us wander all over the place in confusion, often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices... the art of measurement in contrast, would make

²⁷ Ibid, 355c-d.

the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life.²⁸

A person must use the art of measurement to determine the true worth of an action, its actual worth as something good or bad. Proper knowledge is required to measure the pleasure or pain of an action. It is this knowledge that keeps one from being overcome by pleasure and ignorance that allows it to happen.

We can now connect the *Gorgias* with the *Protagoras*. If Penner is correct, for Socrates, we all desire our true good or happiness. Eating junk food is mistakenly seen by many to be a means of achieving our true happiness. That is why knowledge (in particular the knowledge of measurement) in the *Protagoras* is so important. Knowledge of measurement gives us the ability to calculate the consequences of our actions and act in our true self-interest.

One of the things Martha Nussbaum says about the art, or science of measuring is that it is “a τέχνη [craft, art] that has made human beings capable of taking things quite different in kind and comparing them with respect to some property in which they are interested.”²⁹ She also says that

[t]he connection between numbering and knowing, the ability to count or measure and the ability to grasp, comprehend, or control, runs very deep in Greek thought about human cognition... This Platonic argument [for the art of measuring] is the natural

²⁸ Ibid, 356d.

²⁹ Martha Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 106.

development of a long tradition of reflection about the arts and human progress.³⁰

She is trying to show that the idea Plato, through the character of Socrates, comes up with for determining the goodness of an action is not an entirely new concept. The idea that Socrates puts forward is the natural step in the development of this line of thinking. By using the art of measurement to determine the goodness of an action, Nussbaum argues, it becomes truly possible to see how each choice is actually a matter of choosing to do that which is most good. This, in turn, makes not doing things one wants to do not seem as bad because one is only giving up a smaller amount of goodness for the sake of a larger goodness. So, as Socrates said, it would be absurd for someone to choose not to do what is good.

Nussbaum also provides an explanation as to why Plato seems to support hedonism in the *Protagoras* while trying to show that it is not actually what produces the good life in the *Gorgias*. She argues that the pleasure Socrates seems to support in the *Protagoras* is not the same kind of hedonistic pleasure that late fourth century texts discuss. Rather it is a kind of placeholder, because

[t]he need for measurement motivates the search for an acceptable measure. What we need to get a science of measurement going is, then, an end that is single (differing only quantitatively): specifiable in advance of the τεχνη (external); and present in everything valuable in such a way that it may plausibly be held to be the source of its value... [pleasure] is one of the few things we value that turns up in

³⁰ Ibid, 107-108.

just about everything; it is something to which we might think we reduce every other value.³¹

Therefore, the use of pleasure in the *Protagoras* is merely a way for Socrates to adequately explain why people need the art of measuring. Looking at the *Gorgias*, it is clear that he thinks people do use pleasure as an end, but he is quick to point out that it is simply an apparent end and people actually desire as their actual end that which is truly good. To figure out what is truly good, there must be some way to measure different actions, and this is where the argument Socrates presents in the *Protagoras* comes in.

This, however, puts the reader in the difficult position of accepting the fact that hedonism, an ideal that Plato clearly rejects in later dialogues, is necessary for the character of Socrates to establish an art of measuring. It should be noted that at the end of the *Protagoras*, Socrates says, “since it is measurement, it must definitely be an art, and knowledge... [w]hat exactly this art, this knowledge is, we can inquire into later.”³² While it is necessary for there to be a way of measuring what the actual end, or good, is, at this point in time, Socrates is simply trying to find something (pleasure) that is “present in everything valuable”³³ which can be measure.

PLATO: IN CONCLUSION

One of the hardest ideas to grasp that Plato puts forth is that people desire the actual good rather than the apparent good. Most modern philosophers settle with saying the later because it is easier to reconcile why people do certain actions. It seems hard to

³¹ Ibid, 110.

³² “Protagoras,” 357b.

³³ Nussbaum, 110.

argue that if a person does an action that results in something bad that person did not really want to complete that action. However, Socrates takes this viewpoint because he describes an action by its properties rather than its description alone. That is why gambling is not just the act of betting on cards or races, it is also the consequence of losing everything. He acknowledges that certain actions do not bring pleasure until later, and other things that bring a great amount of pleasure instantaneously do not always have pleasurable long-term results. One must look at the *Protagoras* to see how it is possible to measure each action. Socrates believes that a person's wellbeing depends on his ability to tell the good from the bad, not only at the time of the action, but also further down the road.

ARISTOTLE'S *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS*

The *Nicomachean Ethics* was Aristotle's attempt to discuss his idea of the good and virtuous life. Aristotle emphasizes the proper development of character instead of focusing on a set of moral rules because he did not believe that such truths could not be found in universal ideas.³⁴ There are three characteristics that are typically associated with Aristotle's *Ethics*: Habit, the Mean, and the Noble. Typically Habit is understood as habituated action, but it might make understanding the *Ethics* easier if it is instead thought of as character properly trained in moral virtues. The Mean is usually thought of as a quantitative assessment of morals that implies mediocrity. It is, however, better understood as a qualitative equilibrium that takes into account both desire and restraint. The Noble comes from the Ancient Greek word *καλον*, which traditionally has been

³⁴ Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed, Introduction to *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 2-3.

translated to mean “noble” but is actually translated more accurately as “beautiful; good”. Understanding Aristotle’s three main ideas in this way provides a more accurate way of looking at and interpreting his *Ethics*.³⁵

Before looking his idea of the mean, a very brief discussion on what Aristotle says about habit is necessary. “Now since virtue is of two sorts, one pertaining to thinking and the other to character, excellence of thinking is for the most part, both in its coming to be and in its growth, a result of teaching, for which reason it has need of experience and time, while excellence of character comes into being as a consequence of habit.”³⁶ Virtuous character traits, Aristotle claims, are not part of a person by nature, but must instead be learned and habituated. Things that naturally occur, like objects falling down, cannot be trained to do otherwise. No matter how many times one throws a stone in the air, it will never get the point of the exercise and decide to fall up. Aristotle then says

we do take on the virtues by first being at work in them, just as also in other things, namely the arts; the things that one who has learned them needs to do, we learn by doing, and people become, say housebuilders by building houses... So too, we become just by doing things that are just, temperate by doing things that are temperate, and courageous by doing things that are courageous.³⁷

This is given as an example of something that a person has by nature, the senses. In the case of seeing or hearing, one cannot become better at seeing if one was born with an eye problem. A person can, however, learn to build houses or play a musical instrument. This

³⁵Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2002), xi-xxv.

³⁶ Ibid, Book I, 1103a.

³⁷ Ibid, Book II, 1103a30-1103b.

is related to a central idea in Aristotle's works, "being-at-work", which is the "activity by which anything is what it is."³⁸ In the *Ethics*, it specifically refers to the active condition of deliberately being at work. One must perform just, temperate or courageous actions to be considered just, temperate or courageous. It is in this way, therefore, that habit and proper teaching make it possible for one to be virtuous.

Aristotle's idea of the mean is central to understanding what he believes the good life is. He says that "things such as virtues are of such a nature as to be destroyed by deficiency and by excess."³⁹ It is in moderation that virtue is preserved. Take eating. To the extreme of excess, eating is considered gluttony and on the side of deficiency it could be considered fasting or even anorexia. The mean would be eating in moderation. Aristotle points out that the mean is different for each person. "Now in this way everyone who has knowledge avoids excess and deficiency, but seeks the mean and chooses this, but not the mean that belongs to the thing but the mean in relation to us."⁴⁰ In the same way, eating is relative to each individual. The amount of food that would be the mean for a wrestler would be significantly more than the mean for a teacher. A wrestler requires much more food for his lifestyle than a teacher would. If a teacher were to eat the mean amount of a wrestler, he would be consuming an excess amount of food. The opposite holds true for a wrestler; if he were to eat the mean amount of a teacher he would be consuming a deficient amount of food. In both cases, neither person is benefited by eating a mean that does not relate to his occupation. It is at this point that Aristotle draws a connection with habit.

³⁸ Ibid, 202.

³⁹ Ibid, Book II, 1104a10.

⁴⁰ Ibid, Book II, 1106b

Learning, and being habituated, to recognize what the mean is for oneself in each situation will help each person realize what the virtuous action is.

J. O. Urmson believes that the doctrine of the mean is not meant as moral advice, but rather as a further definition of the excellence of character.

What distinguishes excellence of character from all other states [those being the six states that Aristotle distinguishes ranging from heroic excellence to brutishness] is, in (Aristotle's) own words, that it is 'concerned with choice, lying in a mean, that is, the mean relative to us, this being determined by the rational procedures by which a wise man would determine it.' Like badness of character, but unlike intellectual excellence it is a settled state concerned with choice; unlike all other states, it is in a mean relative to us.⁴¹

In that description, Urmson says that excellence of character is relative to each individual because the doctrine of the mean is what distinguishes excellence of character from all the other human states.

Chapter Four of Book Two in the *Nicomachean Ethics* expands on this idea. Aristotle says, "while the actions are called just or temperate whenever they are the sorts of things that a just or temperate person would do, the one who does them is not just or temperate unless he also does them in the way that just and temperate people do them."⁴² Aristotle's main pedagogical task is to clarify concepts rather than recommend behavior. Hence, Aristotle is trying to articulate and describe ἀρετή. The truly good, or excellent to use

⁴¹ J. O. Urmson, "Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 157-158.

⁴² Aristotle, Book II, 1105b

Aristotle's classification, man desires the virtuous actions that he does while the self-controlled man must make himself do the actions. Aristotle says that it is only the good man who truly does virtuous actions because he does so with both passion and action and not merely action alone. Urmson believes that when Aristotle said excellence of character was concerned with both action and emotion, "he does not mean that it has two distinct fields." Actions are done as a manifestation of emotion.⁴³ The good man acts in accordance to both while the self-controlled man must disregard his emotions to perform the virtuous action. A good person, therefore, would enthusiastically return a wallet while the self-controlled man must first fight with himself before returning it. This is why, for Aristotle, habituation from an early age is essential. A person can be taught what excellence of character is at an early age and can begin to habituate virtuous actions, which Aristotle believes leads to being a virtuous person.

Further along in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle starts discussing the difference between willing and unwilling actions and how deliberation for a desired end plays into each action. "Now since virtue is concerned with feelings and actions, and praise and blame come about for willing actions, but for unwilling actions there is forgiveness and sometimes even pity."⁴⁴ It would not make sense to blame a person for doing an action that has been forced upon him. Unwilling action, Aristotle determines, is an action done by force through the influence of external actions. An unwilling action can also be done out of ignorance. This kind of unwillingness comes from "an ignorance of the particulars in which the action occurs and with which it is concerned... since the one who is ignorant of any of

⁴³ Urmson, 159.

⁴⁴ Aristotle, Book II, 1109b30.

these acts unwillingly.”⁴⁵ Aristotle draws from this that an unwilling action done out of ignorance must also be accompanied by a sense of pain and remorse on the part of the person. A willing action, therefore, is an action done with knowledge of all the circumstances surrounding an action and no outside determining factors.

Aristotle continues this with a discussion on the nature of choice, since it seems to be related to willing actions. It is not the same thing as a willing action because willing actions are present in both humans and animals while choice is only present in rational beings. Aristotle goes through all the things that choice cannot be (desire, wishing, opinion) concluding that it is “involved with reason and thinking things through” and must therefore be part of deliberation.⁴⁶ He clarifies by saying correct deliberation is done, by a sane person, about “things that are up to us and are matters of action... [a]nd among human beings, each sort deliberates about the things to be done by its own acts.”⁴⁷ This is very obviously an important part of choice, because, as Aristotle believes, it is through choosing the correct, and willing, action that deliberation is manifest. He also says that “deliberation is about the things to be done by oneself, while the actions are for the sake of something else. For the end could not be deliberated upon, but the things that are related to the end are.”⁴⁸ Aristotle believes that one cannot choose the end, or the action. Instead, one deliberates about the different aspects of the thing that is related to a specific desired end and then chooses willingly what one will do.

It is from this idea that Aristotle introduces his next claim. He believed that actions come from within each individual person. “Since then what is wished for is the end, while

⁴⁵ Ibid, Book III, 1110b30.

⁴⁶ Ibid, Book III, 1112a.

⁴⁷ Ibid, Book III, 1112a30.

⁴⁸ Ibid, Book III, 1112b.

the things related to the end are deliberated about and chose, the actions involving these things would be the results of choice and willing acts. And the ways of being at work that belong to the virtues are concerned with these acts. Therefore virtue is up to us, and likewise also vice.”⁴⁹ Aristotle thought that a person could choose to be virtuous or not, but once the choice had been made to be unjust one could not make the decision to be just. “[P]eople are themselves responsible for having become that sort by living carelessly, and for being unjust or dissipated, in the one case by acting dishonestly, or, in the other, by passing their time in drinking and things of that sort, for it is the ways of being at work involved in each way of acting that produces such people.”⁵⁰ Just as a person training for a competition or performance by working on perfecting certain acts of being at work, the habits of the unjust or bad person produce similar acts that the being at work for are bad. Virtue and vice, therefore, are both willing and it is each individual person who chooses actions and active conditions which are habituated into just and good things.

Everything Aristotle says up to this point is important for understanding what he believes about the good and pleasurable life. Leading up to the statement that brings everything together, Aristotle discusses what he thinks pleasure is. He equates it to the action of seeing, because, like seeing, pleasure cannot become more complete over time after having it for a while. He also says that pleasure can not be motion because that would imply that it is going towards something, and is thus not complete, and pleasure is typically thought of as the end. Pleasure is not opposed to reason or virtue because it is the completion of being at work.

⁴⁹ Ibid, Book III, 1113b.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Book III, 1114a.

[O]ne might assume that all beings reach out for pleasure because they all desire to live. Life is a certain kind of being-at-work in connection with those things and by means of those capacities that satisfy him most... The pleasure brings the activities to completion and hence brings living to completion, which is worthy of choice.⁵¹

These statements sum up what Aristotle has been saying about virtue, choice and pleasure. Correctly understood, pleasure is not in opposition to reason or virtue. One would not choose to live a life that was unfulfilled or incomplete and Aristotle believes that it is pleasure as part of a willing action or choice that helps complete life.

He does acknowledge that this makes pleasure seem different in kind because what will result in a complete life for one person is not the same for another person. "This [the fact that each person seeks pleasure as an end] is also why pleasures seem to differ in kind, since we believe that things that are different in kind are brought to completion by different means... Similarly, ways of being-at-work that are different in kind are brought to completion by means that differ in kind."⁵² Aristotle says that it is pleasure in addition to being at work that helps bring an activity to completion. A person who enjoys playing an instrument becomes good at it because it is enjoyable. Since there would be different kinds of pleasures, that of music, geometry, philosophy, and other activities, it is important to determine which are the best kinds of pleasures. To do this, Aristotle says one must look at what a person of high moral standing considers the goodness of beautiful and pleasurable things.

⁵¹ Ibid, Book X, 1175a10.

⁵² Ibid, Book X, 1175b.

[I]t seems that a thing is what it shows itself to be to a person of serious moral stature. And if this is beautifully said, as it seems to be, then the measure of each thing is virtue, or a good person, insofar as he is good, and what appear to be pleasures to this person would be pleasures, and the things he enjoys would be pleasant... So if there is one or more than one activity belonging to the man who is fulfilled and blessed, the pleasures that bring them to completion should be spoken of, in the governing sense, as the pleasures of a human being.⁵³

The virtuous person sees things how they are, either good or bad, and those things that appear to be pleasant are the good things. Any pleasure that falls outside the realm of a good activity is simply secondary and not having it is not a vice. Not having the pleasure of being at work, or the activities of a virtuous person, is a vice because one who does not have them is lacking.

Julia Annas says that Aristotle's main idea about pleasure is that it is not a bad thing and in a good life it should be pursued. "Thus the good man takes pleasure in virtuous activities and finds the wicked man's pursuits not merely wrong, but repellent. So it is right for the good man to seek pleasure; pleasure will point him in the right direction, for the pleasure proper to an activity encourages the performance of that activity."⁵⁴ Thus the pleasure of a good man encourages good and virtuous actions, because, as Aristotle said, the more one is habituated to do certain good and virtuous actions the more one is habituated to perform those actions. Having said this, Annas also claims that "pleasures

⁵³ Ibid, Book X, 1176a20-30.

⁵⁴ Julie Annas, "Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 285.

vary in goodness with the activities that give rise to them, and so pleasure cannot be thought of as an ethically neutral aim.”⁵⁵ While the good and the bad person both aim at pleasure, the good man does so with virtuous actions in mind while the bad man does not.

Annas points out two problems people typically have when reading Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. The first being that, in moral choice, pleasures must be comparable to each other. She argues that Aristotle is serious when he says a person’s “notion of pleasure” and what he “find[s] pleasant is internal to [his] conception of the good.”⁵⁶ The example Aristotle uses pertains to wealth, which is obviously desirable. It is not desirable, however, if it comes at the price of betraying a person. The good person would then have no desire for the money while a person who would still be tempted to take it would no longer be good. The other problem Annas says people have is that pleasure is assumed to be subjective when what Aristotle is actually arguing for is an objective view of pleasure. “It would be incoherent to link pleasure and goodness as Aristotle does, and also to admit that anyone’s say-so was as good as anyone else’s about what is pleasant, whatever their moral view.”⁵⁷ Taking a subjectivist view on pleasure is contrary to what Aristotle is trying to say about the good. The good is known by a moral person, and to say that pleasure, which Aristotle links to goodness, is determined by both moral and immoral people alike is missing the point Aristotle is wanting to make when he says the just and temperate person is good. It does not make sense, after all, to listen to someone talk about how taking money unjustly is acceptable, when one actually knows it is wrong. “So the claim that the good man’s pleasures are truly pleasant while the bad man’s are not is not unrealistic

⁵⁵ Ibid, 292.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 293.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 296.

moralizing; it is just the natural result of taking seriously both the idea that pleasures differ in kind and the idea that there is a right and wrong about what kinds of action are really good and bad.”⁵⁸ Aristotle’s conception of the good life hinges on accepting the fact that, through his notion of habit and the mean, pleasures that come about by being at work can be good or bad. He is simply trying to help people realize that is idea of the good life is brought about by moral habit.

ARISTOTLE: IN CONCLUSION

It should be noted that this paper has been overly simplistic in dealing with Aristotle by addressing only one of his ideas about what the good or virtuous life consists in. He is not completely consistent in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, slightly changing what he thinks a virtuous life is. This section of the paper is going to look at how his viewpoint changed by looking at what he says in Books I, VII and X.

Book one of the *Nicomachean Ethics* introduces Aristotle’s idea of happiness, or εὐδαιμονία. As noted earlier, the modern English translation of many ancient Greek words does not adequately get across the true meaning. εὐδαιμονία is better translated as flourishing or fulfillment, not simply happiness. Happiness is, therefore not merely a disposition. It is a way of life. Having said this, Aristotle’s thinks happiness is a final end, one does not desire happiness for another purpose; happiness is desired for happiness’ sake. After discussing the characters of what the highest good must have (self-sufficiency and completeness), Aristotle says, “perhaps to say that the highest good is happiness is obviously something undisputed, while it still begs to be said in a more clear and distinct

⁵⁸ Ibid, 298.

way what happiness is.”⁵⁹ From here he begins to discuss what it is that makes people good, showing that a person is considered to be good if he performs his function well. A doctor or painter is thought to excel at his particular craft if he does his work well. Aristotle thinks it is natural to assume that would also make a human being good, to complete the function of being human. He is quick to stress the importance of it being a distinctly human action because there are aspects of living that is shared among all living creatures, plants animals and humans. The conclusion he comes to is that people are good if they perform their function well and the supreme good of humans is the activity of the rational soul acting with virtue throughout a person’s life.

[T]he human good comes to be disclosed as being-at-work of the soul in accordance with virtue, and if the virtues are more than one, in accordance with the best and most complete virtue. But also, this must be in a complete life, for one swallow does not make a Spring, nor one day, and in the same way one day or a short time does not make a person blessed and happy.⁶⁰

Aristotle’s idea of a good life, as expressed in Book One, is that the supreme good is happiness, and a person achieves the good by being-at-work in a rational life.

In Book Seven, Aristotle expounds on his idea. Like happiness he thinks that pleasure is an activity, it comes from living life well. He says pleasures “are ways of being-at-work and are ends, and they do no result from states that are coming into being but from capacities that are being exercised... therefore it is not right to claim that pleasure is a perceptible process of coming-into-being; rather, one ought to say that it is a being-at-work

⁵⁹ Aristotle, Book I, 1097b

⁶⁰ Ibid, Book I, 1098a.

of an active condition in accord with nature.”⁶¹ Taken with what he says in Book One, Aristotle is saying that happiness and pleasure both come from the active state of being-at-work that is inherent to all human beings, the process of rationally contemplating life. An ultimately good life consists of being-at-work and pleasure that comes from that active state.

The problem for Aristotle’s arguments come in Book Ten. He takes a much more conservative stance on pleasure than he does in Book Seven. In the previous book, he seemed to be saying that pleasure is a supreme good. Book Ten, however, is much more reserved and expresses the idea that pleasure perfects an activity, rather than pleasure itself is an activity. Aristotle relates this to motion. Motion “is in time and directed at some end, as housebuilding, and is complete when it brings about that at which it aims.”⁶² Pleasure, on the other hand, must always be complete. There is no process by which pleasure is in motion towards a specific aim. Pleasure “brings the activity to completion not as an active condition present within it all along, but as something that comes over it, like the bloom of well-being in people who are at the peak of their powers.”⁶³ In Book Ten, Aristotle is taking the position that pleasure is connected to a good life merely because it compliments happiness, not because it is a necessary component to having a good and virtuous life.

While Aristotle’s two positions on pleasure are clearly incompatible, Julia Annas thinks this is not ultimately a problem. She acknowledges that there is a difference between Books Seven and Ten but says that “they agree in the thesis that pleasure is not a

⁶¹ Ibid, Book VII, 1153a.

⁶² Ibid, Book X, 1174a.

⁶³ Ibid, Book X, 1174b.

bad thing. In the good life it is something to be pursued, not shunned.”⁶⁴ Aristotle is consistent in saying that he believes that pleasure is not inherently bad, and in that pleasures do differ according to the corresponding activities. Annas sums it up by saying

Thus the good man takes pleasure in virtuous activities and finds the wicked man’s pursuits not merely wrong by repellent. So it is right for the good man to seek pleasure; pleasure will point him in the right direction, for the pleasure proper to an activity encourages the performance of that activity, and the pain or boredom proper to it correspondingly discourages it; thus the good man’s pleasure will encourage him in his tendency to perform good actions and will confirm the foundation of virtuous habits.⁶⁵

Just as pleasure encourages a good man, it negatively encourages a bad man to continue his bad habits. Aristotle is saying that it is essential for people to have the correct view about pleasure; it is not the same for the good man and the bad man, but the pleasure the good man finds in virtuous activities is the kind of pleasure that enhances life. Even though he does not have a consistent idea about exactly how pleasure relates to each activity, Aristotle is arguing that seeking pleasure in virtuous actions is not to be shunned.

IN CONCLUSION

When studying the Hellenistic ideal of the good life, it is important to look at the arguments of both Plato and Aristotle. Having done this, it is clear that there are two very

⁶⁴ Julie Annas, “Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 285.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 285.

important differences between their ideas. The first revolves around the nature of the good. Plato's ideas support a universal good while Aristotle clearly thinks there cannot be such a thing. The second difference involves pleasure, its nature and how it figures into the good and virtuous life. The remainder of this paper will examine the differences between Plato and Aristotle.

To understand what constitutes a good or virtuous life, it is important to understand what "good" is. The works of Plato that this work examines do a good job of highlighting what he thinks the good is, but they do not clearly show how his views differ from Aristotle. To clearly see this, it is best to look at Book VII of the *Republic* where Plato outlines his idea of universal truths. Plato describes the life of people who live in a cave underground from childhood, chained to the ground facing the back wall. There is a fire burning above and behind them with a low wall in between. On the far side of the wall there are silent people carrying representations of all sorts of things, which cast shadows upon the wall that the prisoners, for lack of a better word, are facing. Not knowing anything else, these prisoners assume that the shadows they see are what comprise the world. If one of these people is set free and turned around, the light would pain his eyes and the shadows he grew up thinking to be true would seem more well defined than the thing making the shadow. Now say that the freed prisoner is forced up the path to the mouth of the cave. The sun would blind him and as his eyes adjusted to the bright light, he would begin to see shapes and shadows. Eventually, this man would be able to look up upon the sun and would then infer that it governs the visible world; and from this he would count himself lucky to know the truth of things. It is from this that Plato draws his conclusions. The visible world is likened to the shadowy and the sun is like the fire. The journey to the knowable world is difficult,

like that of the man traveling from darkness into light.⁶⁶ Plato believes that the Good, and the Forms of all other knowable things, are the highest form of knowledge and without the active pursuit of those forms, people remain in the visible realm, believing the mere shadows of the true forms to be all there is.

In the knowable realm, the form of the good is the last thing to be seen, and it is reached only with difficulty. Once one has seen it, however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything, that it produces both light and its source in the visible realm, and that in the intelligible realm it controls and provides truth and understanding, so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it.⁶⁷

The Good is the highest part of the knowable realm and all other things thought to be good are simply shadows of the form. This is why Plato believes that people desire the actual good and not what is thought to be good. Understanding what the Good is, however, requires a proper education. Therefore, like Aristotle, Plato believes that education is an integral part to knowing the good.

Unlike Plato, however, Aristotle does not believe there is a universal good that all people aim at. His biggest objection comes in the middle of Book One of *Nicomachean Ethics*. He says

the good is attributed to what something is and also to the sort of thing it is and to a relation it has, while the thinghood of something,

⁶⁶ Plato. *Republic*, trans G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*. Edited by John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997), 514-517b.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 517c.

which is something on its own, by nature has priority over a relation it has... so that there could not be any form common to these. Further, since *good* is meant in just as many ways as *being* is... it is clear that there could not be any common good that is one and universal, for if there were it could not have been meant in all the ways of attributing being but only in one.⁶⁸

Aristotle does not believe that in every object there is something that makes that particular thing one of its kind, especially when in reference to good things. Bees and flowers all have certain components that make them their respective type, but not all good things have similar parts that would qualify them all as good. To continue his objection, Aristotle says the good “seems to be a different thing in each different action and art... What then is the good in each of them? Or is it that for the sake of which they do everything else? ... And so, if there is some end for all actions, this would be the good that belongs to action, and if there is more than one such end, these would constitute the good.”⁶⁹ Aristotle believes that each action aims at a higher good, and that anything done for the sake of another thing must be incomplete. The good must be complete so it is done as an end in itself, and Aristotle believes that there are many different final ends that constitute the good. Because of this, he does not think that there is a Good like Plato does.

The other major difference between Plato and Aristotle is the role they believe pleasure plays in the good life. In looking at the jar argument, it is very obvious what role Plato thinks it has. Pleasure comes from contentment with the lot one is handed in life; in being satisfied and not continually seeking to fill life with things. Plato clearly thinks that

⁶⁸ Aristotle, Bk 1, 1096a.

⁶⁹ Ibid, Bk 1, 1097a.

pain, not pleasure, results from always seeking pleasure and such a life is often equated with the life of an addict. Plato does not see how a life of always having to worry about not having enough of something, and thus continually seeking it out, can be a good life.

Pleasure is a static thing, and Plato thinks the activity behind constantly seeking pleasure is bad. Aristotle, on the other hand, clearly thinks that pleasure is a kind of motion. It comes about by a virtuous person seeking to do virtuous actions. Under Aristotle's view, it compliments the good life. This is contrary to Plato who sees pleasure as something that should not be sought because it is not necessarily good.

PART TWO: HEROIC AND TRAGIC LITERATURE

Literature portrays the thoughts and feelings of a culture. It praises qualities that are considered good and demeans character traits that are thought to be flaws. It can express outrage, and pleasure, at situations that arise in day-to-day life. It is also a way to teach life lessons in an interesting and creative way. When examining the literary works of a particular group, it is important to take into consideration what the point of each specific work is. Is it for enjoyment or is it meant to be thought provoking? The answers vary, but the lines between the two are not always clear. There can be an epic poem or play that is meant to be entertainment, but embedded in the lines of the text are the ideas that are most important to each specific culture. Looking at the themes and ideas present in the literature of a culture provides an insight to what the society thought was important.

One thing to consider when looking at the literature of another culture, especially one that is as old and foreign to the present day as that of the Ancient Greeks, is the difference in cultures. In situations like this, it is important to remember that not only is

there an issue of translation but there is also a vast time difference to contend with. Ideas naturally evolve over time, and trying to understand something that is foreign to this day in age is only complicated by incomplete or inaccurate translations. “Most people know Greek literature through translations. These are often pathetic, pale shades of the vigorous and sensuous original tongue.”⁷⁰ Ancient Greek is a very colorful and diverse language and it can be difficult to convey its depth. This is usually because written Greek kept many of the same characteristics as the spoken dialects. “The Greek literary language by comparison [sic], although extraordinarily rich, with a large and subtle verb system and an enormous vocabulary, always retained a strong flavor of the spoken tongue... it flows more naturally... than rationally.”⁷¹ Especially with poetry from the oral tradition, Greek literature had a tendency to have a more natural flow when expressing thoughts and ideas, more than likely because it made remembering the epics easier. Since many of the earliest texts from ancient Greece were passed on orally, it is only natural that they retain a strong sense of the spoken language. This is different than English, which has a written language that is usually different than the spoken dialect. Spoken English has become much more informal, encouraged by the advances in technology, and this lax in rigid structure has not been adapted into written English. Another difference that must be kept in mind is that Greek vocabulary is vast and often has different words to express slight variations in meaning that would, in English, simply be expressed by a single word, making it difficult to translate specific ideas and leading to a concept that does not translate well into English.

⁷⁰ Charles Rowan Beye, *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 17-18.

On top of these differences, there are a few other things to keep in mind. First is that ancient Greek “is a musical language [that] has a number of features lacking in contemporary Western languages that create musicality.”⁷² One of these is the rhythmic element that can be found when distinguishing between long and short syllables, especially when reading poetry. The metrical units are determined by vowel-length, which affects accentuation. Also, “Greek is an inflected language, that is, elements added to the semantic root indicate such things as case gender, number, and person. These elements frequently indicate as well the relationship of the words.”⁷³ In other words, ancient Greek is nowhere near as dependent on word order as English. Expressing ideas becomes a different type of creative process because it is not tied down by the typical subject-verb-object sentence structure. It also makes comparing or contrasting ideas more meaningful because the words in question can be beside each other to strengthen their relationship. One of the last things that really distinguishes the Greek language is the use of the particle. “These are words, generally monosyllables, that give a sense to the expressed meaning that our pitch, gestures and facial expressions do in contemporary speech.”⁷⁴ The particle can distinguish between this man right here and that man over there by a single word. It adds a layer of meaning that would not otherwise be present in the written text. “The precise combination of casualness (with its freedom to originate) and seriousness (the concern to say something, to be exact...) is one of the marked qualities of ancient Greek.”⁷⁵ In this sense, the language of Homer can be seen in the language of later tragedy and philosophy and

⁷² Ibid, 25.

⁷³ Ibid, 26-27.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 29.

eventually in the New Testament because it is essentially the same creature that has been adapted through various spoken and written tendencies.

Before looking at specific authors, both before and after the writings of Plato and Aristotle, this paper is going to examine some general characteristics of ancient Greek literature. "Greek poetry achieves its effect through the sustained rhythm of words chosen for their imaginative power, and Greek prose through the persuasiveness and clarity which are essential to eloquence."⁷⁶ The words of the ancient Greeks are able to portray qualities that are not so foreign to modern man in a way that makes it memorable. It is done by "an omission of anything which seems unessential and by an emphasis on what seems structurally or emotionally important... so Greek literature achieves its special distinction by omitting everything that is not essential to the plan of the whole and securing its effect by the power given to each part in its place."⁷⁷ Writers in ancient Greece were able to manipulate words, and their order, in such a way that made it possible for the writers to use as few words as possible and still get their ideas across. "Truths of great acuteness and situations of real moment are expressed with such directness that at first we are puzzled and feel that it is almost childish... The simplest words may yield a profound truth and an emotion which is all the stronger for being disciplined."⁷⁸ This is true for both its poetry and prose.

⁷⁶ C. M. Bowra, *Ancient Greek Literature*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 12.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 13.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 15.

HEROIC LITERATURE

The Heroic Age of Greek Literature is typically considered the period when Homer composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and texts that were composed in and around the same time are sometimes referred to as Homeric literature. There are several key features that distinguish Heroic texts from other ancient Greek styles. Perhaps one of the most obvious traits of works from this time is that it was “thought to eclipse all that come after it.”⁷⁹ Like many cultures, the Greeks felt that there was a “golden age” in their past that was essentially the height of their civilization. For the Greeks, this legendary age was a heroic age where the achievements of man surpassed any that came before and any that would come after. It was a time when men were the sons of gods and the gods would help or hinder those who had their favor.

In this way, the characters of Homer’s two epics are truly heroic characters. Achilles personifies the ideal of strength, despite his obvious downfall of uncontrollable anger. The character of Odysseus is the embodiment of the ideal of wisdom. While this paper is only looking at the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as examples of Heroic literature, there were many poets who wrote in this style. Pindar is one of the last poets to write in the Heroic tradition. The odes he wrote to various athletes praise the achievements bestowed upon them by the gods. “[T]hough they were commissioned to honor boys and men distinguished for muscle and skill, Pindar’s victory odes entertain their listeners with local nymphs and heroes, with bits of legend and myth.”⁸⁰ The modern reader might, at first, be confused by this, thinking that a victory ode should be dedicated to the victorious athlete and their achievement.

⁷⁹ C. M. Bowra, *Homer*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972), 79.

⁸⁰ Anne Pippin Burnett, *Pindar: Odes for Victorious Athletes*, (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 1.

Pindar, however, does not even mention which sport or event it is that is the cause of the ode. This is because the “Hellenic contender in an athletic competition offered his inherited strength, his acquired training, and his own concentrated courage, as well as his blood, his bones, and possibly his life, for the delight of supernatural spectators who might in return bestow favor upon the athlete, his family, and his community.”⁸¹ Pindar was one of the last writers of the heroic tradition who honored the gods as the reason for the great achievements of man. Homer, too, attributed the victories of his heroes to the gods. Achilles’ strength is due to his divine birth and favor. Odysseus is often helped by the goddess Athena, who is noted for her wisdom. While Homer’s epics are written to honor these great men, it is clear that the gods play a more important part in the shaping of Homeric heroes.

HOMER’S *ILIAD*

“The wrath, goddess sing, of Achilles Peleus’ son”⁸² is the opening line of the *Iliad*, a tale of the events of the ninth year of the Trojan war as told by Homer; and while this is, overall, a story about the wrath and anger of Achilles, the *Iliad* is also about the virtue of strength. It starts detailing why it is that Achilles is not willing to fight for Agamemnon, injured pride, and how his absence hurts the Achaean army. Not only is Achilles a fearsome warrior but he also inspires the men who fight with and under him and his absence on the battlefield outside Troy is felt by both sides. The Trojans gain confidence because they are able to beat the Greeks who are unable to make any progress in the war. Achilles is

⁸¹ Ibid, 1-2.

⁸² Homer, *Iliad* Bk 1, 1.

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3atext%3a1999.01.0133>
Translation mine.

unwilling to help his comrades, despite their inability to win without his help, so his dear friend Patroclus puts on Achilles' armor and returns to the fighting. The Achaeans, thinking Achilles has rejoined them, are thus encouraged while the Trojans become fearful. Hector eventually slays Patroclus and claims Achilles' armor as his own. Achilles is devastated by the news of his friend's death and wants revenge; he eventually gets it and the difference between how he treats each body is very telling about his nature. The *Iliad* ends with Priam begging Achilles for Hector's body, evoking the memory of Achilles' father, and a proper funeral for Hector is the closing scene of the epic.

Over the course of the *Iliad*, the reader becomes acquainted with Achilles' nature. It becomes clear that both the Greeks and the Trojans consider him the greatest Achaean warrior. Not only does he bolster the confidence of the Greek army, his mere presence on a battlefield sends Trojans fleeing in terror. Two of the biggest things that give Achilles his power are the history of his birth (his mother is the goddess Thetis), and the divine favor that is bestowed upon him by both Hera and Athena. This power, however, clearly does not come from Achilles' clear-headedness. He is angry with Agamemnon because of a personal slight, which Achilles views as a moral injustice. In his behavior, rage transcends morality and because of this his anger is fierce and relentless while still being noble. Achilles is a hero because of his physical prowess but he becomes the first in a long line of tragic heroes because of his human blindness.

The *Iliad* is a heroic epic, and throughout the lines the reader becomes acquainted with how important heroism and honor were in the Homeric Age. Achilles struggles throughout the poem to reconcile the idea of what he knows to be the honor system as opposed to the royal privilege Agamemnon asserts by taking the girl Achilles had won,

slighting him in front of the entire Achaean army. This is clearly something he struggles a good deal with because even after Agamemnon's apology in the ninth book, Achilles does not join the battlefield for another nine books, and then it is only because of his friend Patroclus' death.

While the first four books are important, this paper is going to begin its discussion in Book Five. Book One explains why Achilles is angry and how he asks his mother to appeal to Zeus to essentially get Agamemnon back. Book Two details Agamemnon's false dream from Zeus and the inventory of the Achaean army. Book Three discusses the first battle scene, the ineptitude of Paris that leads to the eventual fight between himself and Menelaus for the hand of Helen. Book Four starts at Mount Olympus where the gods are holding a council and concludes on the battlefield as the Trojans and Greeks meet in battle. It is in Book Five that the reader truly gets the first real sense of how important honor was to men in the Heroic Age.

Book Five is known as the "Diomedea" because it is all about how one of the Achaean soldiers, Diomedes, truly distinguishes himself on the battlefield. It is somewhat ironic that the first show of true heroism in the *Iliad* is not by the hero himself: Achilles is still fuming in his tent over the injustice done to him by Agamemnon. Book Five opens "And now to Tydeus' son Diomedes, Pallas Athena gave might and courage, in order that he should become pre-eminent among all the Argives and win for himself great fame."⁸³ The entirety of this book is dedicated to the fierce fighting of Diomedes. Homer even tells the reader that, at one point, his fighting was so impassioned that it was not clear which side he was fighting for, but it was no matter because

⁸³Homer *Iliad* Bk 5 1-3, Translation mine.

[d]own the plain he stormed like a stream in spate, a routing winter torrent sweeping away the dikes: the tight, piled dikes can't hold it back any longer, banks shoring the blooming vineyards cannot curb its course—a flash flood bursts as the rains from Zeus pour down their power, acre on acre the well-dug work of farmers crumbling under it—so under Tydides' force the Trojan columns panicked now, no standing their ground, massed, packed as they were.”⁸⁴

Diomedes is fighting so fiercely that he does not even flinch when an enemy arrow wounds him. He is even granted protection by Athena, who gives him the strength of his father, and the ability to see the gods so that he will not fight the immortal ones. It is possible that Athena would not have granted guidance to Diomedes if he had not been exhibiting true heroic grit. It is in this book, after all, that Diomedes achieves *aristeia*, or the highest moment of glory. Such is his power that he does not shrink back from any Trojan, instead pushing forward until he sees Hector, and then he only stops because Ares, god of war, is protecting Hector. Diomedes admits that the only reason he flinches, even now, is because of Athena's command. It is at this point that she revokes her command and so he follows these new orders, racing his chariot, driven by Pallas Athena, towards Ares. The scene that follows highlights the heroic power Diomedes has achieved.

...the two of them closing fast, charging face-to-face and the god thrust first, over Tydides' yoke and reins, with bronze spear burning to take the fighter's life. But Athena, her eyes afire, grabbed the flying shaft, flicked it over the car and off it flew for nothing—and after him

⁸⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles, (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 167.

Diomedes yelled his war cry, lunging out with his own bronze spear and Pallas rammed it home, deep in Ares' bowels where the belt cinched him tight. There Diomedes aimed and stabbed, he gouged him down his glistening flesh and wrenched the spear back out and the brazen god of war let loose a shriek, roaring, thundering loud as nine, the thousand combat soldiers shriek with Ares' fury when massive armies clash.⁸⁵

This is the true moment of Diomedes' glory. With the guidance of the goddess Athena, he is able to injure Ares, god of war. Her protection was granted because of his achievements on the battlefield, and her help earns Diomedes great honor.

Book Five depicts the honor that comes from physical prowess on the battlefield, but the beginning of Book Six does this through words. Glaucus and Diomedes meet but instead of fighting, they realize there was a friendship between their fathers and decide not to fight. In a moment that shows a more gentle side of the Trojan War, Glaucus says to Diomedes, "[e]ven as are the generations of leaves, such are those also of men. As for the leaves, the wind scattered some upon the earth, but the forest, as it grows, puts forth others when the season of spring comes; even so of men one generation of men grows up as another passes away."⁸⁶ Glaucus' words are key to understanding the heroic concept. It is useless to strive after immortality, rather it is of utmost importance to die well. In an age where how one dies is just as important, if not more so, than how one lives, it is easier to understand why Achilles chooses to go to war. He does not want to live a long life that is not full of honor. It is better to die well and with honor than to live without valor.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 192.

⁸⁶ Homer, *Iliad*, Bk 6 146-149, translation mine.

That sentiment is echoed at the end of Book Six when Hector is saying a last goodbye to his wife, Andromache. After she begs him to stay home and not go into battle, Hector replies, “Woman, I too take thought of all this, but wondrously have I shame of the Trojans, and the Trojans’ wives, with trailing robes, if like a coward I shrink apart from battle. Nor does my heart suffer it, seeing that I have learned to be valiant always and to fight among the foremost Trojans, seeking to win my father’s great glory and my own.”⁸⁷ Hector’s words, coupled with those of Glaucus, contain the heart of the heroic age. A good life comes from honor gained through fighting and dying well. Hector is fighting for the honor and glory of his home, Troy, even though he fears the end of his beloved city draws near.

Achilles makes his next appearance in Book Nine, when Agamemnon, after being rebuked by his soldiers for wanting to leave, resolves to apologize to Achilles and honor him with gifts. An envoy is sent to Achilles to present Agamemnon’s apology and to persuade him to return to the fighting. Odysseus speaks first, eloquently appeals to Achilles’ sense of honor in hopes to entice him to return to the fight. Achilles, however, replies that the “same honor (τιμη from τιμαω, meaning to pay, or hold, in honor) waits for the coward and the brave. They both go down to Death, the fighter who shirks, the one who works to exhaustion”⁸⁸ and after detailing all the glories he has won and the plunder that he has give to “Agamemnon, that son of Atreus—always skulking behind the lines, safe in his fast ships—and he would take it all, he’d parcel out some scraps but keep the lion’s share. Some he’d hand to the lords and kings—prizes of honor—and they, they hold them

⁸⁷ Bk 6, 441-446, translation mine.

⁸⁸ Bk 9, 319-320, translation mine.

still. From me alone, Achilles of all Achaeans, he seizes... But now that he's torn my honor from my hands, robbed me."⁸⁹ Achilles is saying gifts are worthless without honor, and Agamemnon has taken both from him simply because he is king. In doing this, Agamemnon has dishonored Achilles in front of the entire army by taking gifts that had been bestowed upon him for his honorable (or at least honorable in the sense that he was winning glory for himself and his side, even though it was won in piratical raids) actions. By not doing the same for the other commanders, Agamemnon is slighting Achilles honor. Achilles does not see the point in dying for glory that is so easily lost, and there is no point accepting honors when both weak and strong are honored the same. This appeals to Calicles argument several hundred years later. After all, Calicles believes Socrates says that seeking such honor is not good because so few people actually possess the strength or wisdom to do so.

The next section this paper will look at is Book Eighteen. In the books leading up to this section, the most important event to this discussion is the action of Patroclus. In hopes to encourage the Achaeans, he dons Achilles' armor and joins the fight. His presence is supposed to inspire the men to fight, but when Hector kills him and removes the great armor of Achilles. While this is standard practice on the battlefield, it is meant as a dishonor to the fallen soldier. At the beginning of Book Eighteen, Achilles finds out about Patroclus' death and is torn apart by grief and guilt. He determines to avenge the death of Patroclus by killing Hector. While his mother Thetis goes to Hephaestus to ask him to forge new armor for her son, immortal Iris goes to Achilles and urges him to enter the fight that is going on over Patroclus' body, in order to save it from the dishonor that will be done to it by the Trojans if they win. So, without armor and at the urging of Iris, Achilles

⁸⁹ Fagles, 262-3.

strode from the rampart, took his stand at the trench... So there he rose and loosed an enormous cry and off in the distance Pallas shrieked out too and drove unearthly panic through the Trojans. And Trojans hearing the brazen voice of Aeacides, all their spirits quaked... Three times the brilliant Achilles gave his great war cry over the trench, three times the Trojans and famous allies whirled in panic—and twelve of their finest fighters died then and there, crushed by chariots, impaled on their own spears.⁹⁰

This is Achilles' first appearance on the battlefield and despite being unarmed and not entering the fray he strikes great fear into Trojan hearts. Homer even tells the reader that when the Trojans meet for council, they stand, rather than sit, because they are so afraid that great Achilles has finally joined the battle. It is clear from the reactions of both the common soldiers and their commanders that all men fear the might of Achilles.

In Book Twenty, Zeus revokes his prior command to the other gods and tells them they can join the fight on whichever side they choose. Zeus is implying that the presence of the hero Achilles raises the bar, for gods are now allowed to fight for mortal men. To illustrate this, Achilles begins to achieve his own *aristeia*, much as Diomedes did in Book Five. Every person Achilles meets in battle, outside those whose fates that extend beyond the Trojan War, falls beneath his blade. In Book Twenty Two, Achilles continues to slaughter the Trojan army. When he drives twelve soldiers into the river, one of the men he marked out to avenge the death of Patroclus was Lycaon, a young soldier he had spared before. Now, however, Achilles has changed and in a speech to Lycaon, he explains that

⁹⁰ Ibid, 474-5.

everyone is bound to die, even himself, and it is useless to try to outrun fate. Many deaths follow the death of Lycaon. Achilles does not seem to tire. It is only when he battles the angered river god that Achilles begins to wear down, and in this case it is only inevitable. A mortal man, after all, would be very hard pressed to win a fight with an immortal god. And even though it is only through the intervention of the gods that he does not die, the strength of Achilles does not completely fail.

The *Iliad* continues with the fight of Hector and Achilles, one that Hector is fated to lose. In a rage Achilles ties the body of Hector to his chariot and drags him around the walls, dishonoring a man who was only fighting for the honor of himself, his father and his city. Patroclus is honored by games, while Hector continues to be dishonored. Finally, after much pleading, Achilles and Priam come to an agreement, Hector's body is returned and the *Iliad* ends. While it is a story about the wrath of Achilles, and how his anger was truly his downfall, it is also an epic that extols the heroic virtue of strength. It is strength that pushes Diomedes into being a great warrior and encourages Athena to guide and protect him. It is also the strength of angry Achilles that causes the Trojan warriors to fear him and pushes the Achaean soldiers to fight. In the eyes of the tragic hero, it is better to die fighting than to live a life of cautious safety. Strength, therefore, is a virtue, in spite of (or perhaps because of) anger, because it is necessary to gain honor on the battlefield.

HOMER'S *ODYSSEY*

"Tell to me the man, muse, much travelled, who wandered much after he sacked the sacred citadel of Troy."⁹¹ So begins the tale of Odysseus, king of Ithaca. The reader finds

⁹¹ Homer, *Odyssey*. Book 1, line 1-2, translation mine.

out that his house has been overrun by suitors vying for his wife not realizing or caring that Odysseus is still alive but unable to return home. When the gods intervene, for good or bad, to help him get home, Odysseus faces more adventures and the reader learns of the trials he has already faced since the fall of Troy ten years ago. Meanwhile, his wife is still trying to get rid of the suitors and, until her deception is discovered, manages to keep the suitors at bay. By the time Penelope has to choose a suitor, Odysseus has returned home but disguises himself as a beggar. Penelope suspects the man who quietly endures the suitors' insults might be her husband so she devises a competition and whoever wins it, gains her hand in marriage. When the competition to win his wife's hand begins, each suitor fails, except for Odysseus because Penelope designed a task she knew only he could complete. Outraged by how the suitors treated his property while he was away, Odysseus kills them all and eventually puts down their outraged families.

Just as the *Iliad* extols the Homeric virtue of strength, the *Odyssey* is all about the excellence of intelligence and cleverness. Odysseus is not the only character who claims it. His son, Telemachus, gains wisdom as he changes from a boy into a man while searching for his father. Penelope, wife of Odysseus, also exhibits cleverness with both the weaving and unweaving of her tapestry and the way in which she chooses to accept her new husband. However, their inventiveness pales in comparison to that of Odysseus, whose intelligence is praised by Zeus, king of the gods, and by Nestor, advisor to the Greek forces.⁹² "But in the *Odyssey* as we have it, the intelligence of Odysseus is much more than cleverness and inventiveness, although this as such is obviously much appreciated by a Greek audience at any time. It is primarily a practical reason of great power capable of

⁹² *Odyssey*, 1.66, 3.122.

controlling spontaneous impulse and even strong emotion, both in others and in the hero himself.”⁹³ It is this part of Odysseus’ intelligence, the strength of mind that makes him a hero, that this paper is looking at.

In Book Four, Telemachus is visiting with Menelaus in hopes of finding out information about his father’s whereabouts. While at dinner, Menelaus shares the story of the Wooden Horse, and how, not only was it Odysseus’ cleverness that came up with the idea, but also the ability to control the impulsive actions of his friends which lead the Achaeans to victory. Menelaus admits that he has

never seen such another man as Odysseus. What endurance too, and what courage he displayed within the wooden horse, wherein all the bravest of the Argives were lying in wait to bring death and destruction upon the Trojans. At that moment you [Helen] came up to us... Three times did you go all around our hiding place and pat it; you called our chiefs each by his own name, and mimicked all our wives... but Odysseus held us all in check, so we sat quite still.⁹⁴

In describing Odysseus, Menelaus uses the word *talasiphron*, which means “patient of mind”. Odysseus had the intelligence to come up with the idea of the wooden horse, but this intelligence would have been for naught if he did not also have the ability to control his own impulsive desire to call out to Helen, who sounded as his wife, but also to control the desires of the other commanders and men inside the belly of the horse to call out to the

⁹³ Agathe Thornton, *People and Themes in Homer’s Odyssey*, (New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1970), 80-81.

⁹⁴ Samuel Butler, trans. *The Odyssey of Homer*. (Roslyn, New York: Classics Club, 1944), 44-5.

woman the mistakenly mistook for their respected wives. The Achaean men would have been defeated on the spot if it had not been for the cleverness of Odysseus.

The next example of Odysseus' strength of mind can be seen in the story of the Cyclops. When trying to leave the cave of the giant, everything rests on the ability of Odysseus to come up with a plan to escape while pushing his own desires to kill the Cyclops aside. The reader learns of what happened in Book Nine, when Odysseus is staying with the Phaeacians. Landing on an island, Odysseus takes twelve of his men to explore the island and learn about the inhabitants. They come upon the cave of the Cyclops and instead of listening to his men, and getting supplies for the ships and leaving, Odysseus wishes to meet the owner of the cave. The Cyclops, however, is monstrous and not kind, killing two of Odysseus' men because he has no regard for the order of life imposed by Zeus. Seeing the disregard for his men's lives, Odysseus is outraged and says he was "inclined to seize my sword, draw it, and drive it into his vitals, but I reflected that if I did we should all certainly be lost, for we should never be able to shift the stone which the monster had put in front of the door."⁹⁵ If he had followed his first reaction and killed the Cyclops out of initial anger, he and all his men would have died. Instead, he is able to control his own impulsive actions and comes up with a clever plan to free his men and injure the Cyclops.

Now that Odysseus has cleared his head of the desire to kill the Cyclops right away, he is able to come up with a plan to get free of the cave. Once again, he uses his craftiness to do this. After the Cyclops returns to the cave after a day of herding, and after having consumed four more of Odysseus' men, Odysseus offers the Cyclops a bowl of wine. The Cyclops drank four bowls, and being sufficiently drunk asked Odysseus his name to which

⁹⁵ Ibid, 110.

he replied “Noman”. After threatening to kill Noman’s men and leave him for last, the Cyclops finally falls down, so drunk he cannot stand up. At this point, Odysseus put a beam of wood into the fire and with the help of his men draw it out just before it catches fire. Then he says that they “drove the sharp end of the beam into the monster’s eye, and bearing upon it with all my weight I kept turning it round and round”⁹⁶ and the Cyclops, being in such pain roars loud enough to draw the attention of other Cyclopes. When asked what is wrong, the Cyclops claims he is being attacked by Noman. Mistaking Noman for no man, the other Cyclopes claim he must make himself right with his father Poseidon for there is no help they can offer. Realizing no help is coming from his friends the Cyclops searches for the stone door of his cave, sitting so he might catch anyone who would thing to escape. Odysseus said that he

kept on puzzling to think how I could best save my own life and those of my companions. I schemed and schemed, as one who knows that his life depends upon it, for the danger was very great. In the end I deemed that this plan would be the best. The male sheep were well grown, and carried a heavy black fleece, so I bound them noiselessly in threes together.. There was to be a man under the middle sheep, and the two on either side were to cover him.⁹⁷

In that manner, he and his men waited until dawn came and the male sheep ran out to feed. The Cyclops, not being smart enough to check the bellies of the sheep, let them out of his cave and thus escaped the grips of the monster and gained food for the rest of the voyage.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid 112.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 113.

⁹⁸ Ibid 108-114.

While Odysseus does possess the virtue of strength that is not what saves him and his men. In this instance, their survival is based solely on his excellence of mind. His knowledge and clever mind help him gain control of an impulse that could have potentially disastrous results highlights the wisdom of Odysseus.

The *arte* of Odysseus rests in the power of his mind and his ability to control not only himself but other men. "The power of mind which makes this control possible is Odysseus' greatest quality: his *dolos*. When *dolos* denotes a quality of mind, and not a trap or a trick, Cunliffe translates it by 'guile, craft, cunning, trickery.' These words are misleading because for us they imply moral disapproval, if not condemnation."⁹⁹ However, it is clear that Odysseus' actions in the *Odyssey* are not viewed with negativity, but are rather praised. "We have already seen that *dolos* is often contrasted with *bie*, 'physical force'. In the Homeric world these are the two means by which a man can fight whether in aggression or defence[sic]."¹⁰⁰ As seen in the *Iliad*, Achilles possesses physical force instead of craftiness of mind. In contrast to this, Odysseus' strength is clearly his cunning intelligence. That is to say, it is not that Odysseus does not possess strength like Achilles, but rather that he is praised and honored for his ability to overcome his desires and use reason to overcome difficult situations. While he is clearly a Homeric hero, Odysseus' ability to control passionate emotions and follow reason can be seen as a precursor to Plato's philosophy of the virtuous man who is directed by reason.

⁹⁹ Thornton 89.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 90.

TRAGIC LITERATURE

Plato, as seen in earlier sections of this paper, was a philosopher who did not believe that the life of the hero, especially as detailed by Homer, was what a virtuous life consisted in. It was not just god-like strength, piety or even intelligence. Plato thought that virtue consists in knowledge of what is actually good and vice is ignorance of that knowledge. He did not praise heroic characteristics because that did not fall into what he deemed to be actually good. The literature from around Homer's time was considered Heroic literature because it praised super strength and boundless wisdom. The decline of what was seen as the Golden Age in Greek history brought about writers who believed there was more to a virtuous life than strength and wisdom that was granted by the gods.

These ideas did not remain philosophical ideals; they spread into other facets of ancient Greek culture and were picked up by other writers. Epics were no longer written to praise a time that had passed. Instead, people began writing poetry and prose that reflected a more personal nature. Unlike Heroic epics, comedies and tragedies discussed things that were relevant for the people who would be listening to their recitation. No longer were the stories about heroes of the past and how the gods intervened in everyday life. Now, it was about events of the recent past, or even about current political events. Out of this several new genres developed, comedy and tragedy. Comedies were a way to make fun of and ridicule what was seen as the shortcomings of certain people and situations. Tragedies, on the other hand, portray suffering. While both are important to the development of Hellenistic literature, this paper will be looking at the tragedies of Euripides to show how the new styles of writing differ from that of Homer and the Heroic Age.

WORKS OF EURIPIDES

Euripides was a tragic playwright who lived in the fifth century B.C.E. and, along with Aeschylus and Sophocles, is considered to be one of the greatest tragedians of ancient Greece. As the name suggests (τραγωδία literally meaning goat song from the early use of the word when a goat would be the prize in recitation competitions, but it developed the meaning of tragedy to represent the genre of literature), tragedies portray instances of human suffering. Euripides is known for developing the idea of treating heroes as ordinary people in extraordinary situations. He is also known for exploring the reasons behind the actions of his characters. Many of his plays revolve around the aftermath of the Trojan War and other mythical parts of Greek history. Some of his plays are not strictly tragic, and it has become obvious that the works of Euripides influenced other genres of writing.

Euripides' play *Electra* is one of several of his plays written in what is known as his Trojan War tragedies. As such, it "contains elements of all their qualities: the bitter pathos of *Trojan Women*, the romantic melodrama of *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, the farce of *Helen*. It also looks back to *Andromache* and forward to *Orestes* as a study in war-bred delinquency."¹⁰¹ Euripides draws on Sophocles' version of the play, but adds his own elements. To the model heroine, Euripides adds exposes "her psychology with a ruthless scalpel and pushing Sophocles' character to its logical extreme, he has lost sight of the spiritual strength with which Sophocles endowed her, and so sacrifices that sympathy for the protagonist which is essential to tragedy."¹⁰² In addition to this he puts Electra's version of the truth in contrast with the truth itself and the two views are continually in

¹⁰¹Euripides, "Electra" trans. Emily Townsend Vermeule, in *Euripides V*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), 3.

¹⁰² Ibid 4.

opposition to each other. “The astigmatism is deliberate. While inspired by Sophocles’ power of characterization, Euripides apparently disapproves of his freeing the protagonists from the painful aftereffects of murder and so reverts to Aeschylus in matters like the blood-curse, the Furies, and the trial.”¹⁰³ However, Euripides somehow manages to leave out the morality that often accompanies Aeschylus’ plays and therefore posits “a true Euripidean demonstration that life resists formula and that even a moral situation as clear as the one confronting the heirs of Agamemnon is chaotic when seen from the inside.”¹⁰⁴

The basis of the play is the desire for revenge. Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, has been sleeping with another man since he has been away fighting in the Trojan War. Upon his return, she brutally murders him in order to continue her affair. Electra and Orestes, the children of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, wish to kill their mother for killing their father. The play opens with a Farmer detailing the return and subsequent death of Agamemnon and how the man who replaced him feared that someone would do to him what was done to Agamemnon. When Electra and Orestes meet, she explains to him, not knowing him to be her brother why she has married a farmer.

ORESTES What was in Aegisthus’ mind, to insult you so?

ELECTRA He hoped that I, so wedded, would have worthless sons.

ORESTES Too weak for undertaking blood-revenge on him?

ELECTRA That was his hope. I hope to make him pay for it.¹⁰⁵

This is the beginning of the plot to not only kill their step-father, but also to commit matricide, for shortly after this Electra expresses her desire to also kill her mother. The

¹⁰³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid 21.

way in which Euripides deals with the idea of revenge is in direct contrast with the Heroic ideal of the act. In the *Iliad*, Achilles desires revenge for the death of Patroclus because he was a good friend and the Trojans were trying to dishonor his body. In *Electra*, revenge is not based on morality. They do not seek it because it was morally unacceptable for Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon. Instead, Electra and Orestes desire revenge for personal reasons that revolve around their standard of living. For Electra, she is forced from her ancestral home to live a life in poverty. Orestes is also forced from his home; fleeing for his life, he has become an exiled outcast. Their desire to revenge the death of their father is more to regain their ancestral home than to gain some semblance of honor for the betrayed king.

In retelling the story of Electra, Euripides attempts to persuade the audience to be sympathetic with his main characters. "The play begins along orthodox melodramatic lines: injured innocents, lost birthright and love, cruel usurpers, the dead calling for vengeance."¹⁰⁶ These are all things an audience familiar with the epics of Homer could appreciate, things that are worth fighting to regain for honor. However, Euripides destroys this sympathy "by a display of wanton brutality."¹⁰⁷ This is seen in how Orestes kills Aegisthus. After making a sacrifice to the gods to protect his house, Aegisthus is sorting the parts of his sacrifice when Orestes "balanced on the balls of his feet, and smashed a blow to his spine. The vertebrae of his back broke. Head down, his whole body convulsed, he gasped to breathe, writhed with a high scream, and died in his blood."¹⁰⁸ The way in which

¹⁰⁶ Ibid 5.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid 5.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid 49.

Orestes kills Aegisthus is truly brutal and slightly underhanded. He was, after all, struck from behind by a devastating blow.

While the murder of the man who took his father's place does not seem to bother him, Orestes is truly torn apart by the thought of committing matricide. As the Clytemnestra approaches Electra's house, his doubt begins to show.

- ORESTES What—what is our action now toward Mother? Do we kill?
- ELECTRA Don't tell me pity catches you at the sight of her.
- ORESTES O god! How can I kill her when she brought me up and bore me?
- ELECTRA Kill her just the way she killed my father. And yours.
- ORESTES O Phoebus, your holy word was brute and ignorant.
- ELECTRA Where Apollo is ignorant shall men be wise?
- ORESTES He said to kill my mother, whom I must not kill
- ELECTRA Nothing will hurt you. You are only avenging Father.
- ORESTES As matricide I must stand trial. I was clean before.
- ELECTRA Not clean before the gods, if you neglect your father.¹⁰⁹

Orestes is struggling with the thought of killing his mother, an act that is condemned in Ancient Greece as something punishable by the wrath of the gods. However, as Electra points out, it is also shameful in the eyes of the gods to not avenge the murder of their father. Despite his doubts, Orestes is persuaded by the words of Electra and sits in wait for the time to kill his mother.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid

Upon killing their mother, both Orestes and Electra feel much regret, an emotion they clearly did not expect to experience. For Electra, the feelings are purely selfish. She is guilty of marching “against the mother who bore [her]” and because of this she is afraid no man will want to marry her.¹¹⁰ Orestes, on the other hand, seems tormented by the act he has just committed, and is already struggling with being able to live with the dying pleas of the woman who bore him. Electra and Orestes have committed “exactly the same atrocity for which they want to punish their elders... Their surprise at the results is more disturbing than their pain.”¹¹¹ Both children truly believed that killing their mother would bring some measure of peace and normalcy back into their lives, and when the opposite happens they are stunned. “The characterization may be ugly, but it is brilliant and convincing. It is deliberately calculated to alienate us from ‘the right side’ ... The victims have been alienated by their cruelty, vanity, and sordid private lives, which their flickering kindness does not sufficiently relieve. Apollo is alienated by a label of brutal ignorance. There is no focus of sympathy left...”¹¹² In one play, Euripides manages to question the morality of the gods; Orestes, after all, clings to the oracle of Apollo for guidance before being pushed by his sister into killing his mother, and also put forth the idea that justice is not always just, for in what situation does an individual, acting without the consent of a judicial body, committing murder to avenge a prior murder equal justice.

Electra is clearly in direct opposition to the Heroic epics. Euripides puts forth the idea that the gods are not always right, and their direction and guidance can lead a person to do horrible things. He is furthering his idea that the morality of the gods is fallible and

¹¹⁰ Ibid 64-5.

¹¹¹ Ibid 6.

¹¹² Ibid 7.

cannot be relied upon. In addition to this, justice is not always clear. In the *Iliad*, Achilles is correct in getting Patroclus' body back from the Trojans so that it may be honored properly. In the *Odyssey*, it is expected that Odysseus would kill the men who have been disrespecting his kingdom and his wife. In *Electra*, murdering one's mother, even when she has killed your father, is not proper justice. Euripides uses this tragedy to question unwavering devotion to the gods and to put forth the idea that justice can be a slippery thing.

IN CONCLUSION

It is often the literature of a culture that provides insight into what was most important for a particular society. Through literature, one can discern the morals of a particular people and also why certain values are held in a higher regard than others. Looking at how the writings of a particular culture change over time can provide valuable information as to how and why thoughts and values developed. When studying the culture of ancient Greece, it is important to note one of the earliest shifts in literature: that of the Heroic epic to what is broadly termed post-Platonic writings.

The world of Homer's epics, the basis for the Heroic age, is based on war. The kingdoms that are featured in his poems are typically small societies that have grouped together for the purpose of mutual protection, or destruction. "Under these social conditions, war is perceived as the most important human activity because the community's ability to wage defensive war is perceived as the precondition of all other

communal values... but all these depend for their existence on the valor of the warrior.”¹¹³

This can especially be seen in the *Iliad* in the character of Hector. He desires nothing more than to stay at home to live a long and full life with his wife and son. However, he knows that the survival of his kingdom rests on his soldiers, and he will not sacrifice that glory for his own sake.

In this sense, the “burden of a Homeric battle falls on a few leading men. The anonymous mass may appear on the battlefield, but they are insignificant in the course of the war; battles are won and lost by those who step forward from the mass... To these leading warriors the Homeric language gives the name heroes.”¹¹⁴ It is the heroes who do the majority of the “important” fighting, the fighting that really matters to the overall outcome of the war. The glory that is Diomedes fighting against the Trojans is not only a masterfully written scene, it is also a description of a man who has stepped forward to fight honorably for his side, to push the Achaeans to victory.

Accepting this view, that the virtue of the hero is essentially strength of both body and mind, Achilles being the epitome of the latter and Odysseus of the former, also means acknowledging that all men are born to die, but honor, for the hero, comes in doing this in a way that brings glory to his name and his people. “The hero is in a sense rescued from mortality; he becomes godlike in the status and immortal in the memory. At the same time he is uniquely conscious of his own mortality.”¹¹⁵ Achilles refuses to remain behind when the Greeks sail to war with the Trojans. In his mind, it is better to go willingly into battle,

¹¹³ James M. Redfield, “The Hero”, in *Homer*, edited by Harold Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers,), 177.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, 177-8.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 180.

knowing one will certainly die, than to remain at home to live a peaceful life that has no honor.

It is important to note, too, that closely tied to the story of the heroic epics is the importance of the gods. Throughout both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the immortal deities play an exceedingly important role. Achilles is granted his strength by both his birth (he is a demigod), and the favor bestowed upon him by both Athena and Hera, arguably two of the most important goddesses in the Greek pantheon. Odysseus has a good deal of natural cunning and intelligence, but he is often given guidance by the goddess Athena. Also on a similar note, Homer appeals to the Muses at the beginning of his epics. “The appeal to the Muses is so conventional by now that we may forget that they are uniquely Greek.”¹¹⁶

While this appeal sets Heroic epics apart from the epics of other civilizations, it also separates them from the literature of Hellenistic Greece.

Around the time that Plato and Aristotle were alive, the way writers approached their craft was beginning to change. Focus was shifting from honoring the gods and heroes to discussing topics that were relevant, and more personal, for the Greek people. The epic was replaced with comedic and tragic plays and the Muses were not invoked to help with the telling of the tale. These plays still provided a sense of the moral foundation of the society, but that had changed. The gods were not the driving force behind a warrior’s prowess in battle; if a man was courageous it was because he was virtuous and not because the gods were guiding him. Reason, therefore, was to be desired, and the ability to rationally choose right actions and behaviors was becoming the new moral norm.

¹¹⁶ Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 31.

CONCLUSION

There should be no doubt that the entrance of Socrates marks the end of the old and the beginning of the new. He brought new forms of thought into Greek thought which completely altered the standards and ambitions of Western thought. He was able to bring about this change because “he had seen the best and known the worst, the Periclean culmination and the Peloponnesian exhaustion; because he had lived in close tension with the things he spoke about; and because he had a sense of tradition and a belief in his rebel premonition.”¹¹⁷ His ideas would completely change how Greeks viewed the world.

Socrates was clearly a person with a powerful personality. “In the midst of the Athenian love of cleverness Socrates insisted on patient, serious talk, holding that he speaks well who knows what he is talking about.”¹¹⁸ Through the dialogues written by his student, Plato, it is obvious that Socrates was a man who enjoyed getting people to talk and listen, to ask questions and answer some in return.

One of the most important questions that philosophers would struggle with is what constituted the good and the affect of this struggle is obvious on the direction that philosophy headed in. Plato and Aristotle paved the way for several new philosophical ideals that are seen in Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism and Neo-Platonism. The thing that distinguishes these new philosophies most is that the focus shifted from the state, as was the focus for Plato and Aristotle, to the individual and how the most satisfactory life could be achieved for themselves in relation to the grander scheme of nature.

¹¹⁷ Alvin W. Gouldner, *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1965),4.

¹¹⁸ Ibid 165.

This new focus can be attributed to the historical conditions of the fourth century into what is known as the Hellenistic Age. It is in this time period that Greek civilization experiences the decline of the *polis*, or city-state and with this comes the decline in the true pursuit of fame. The competitive spirit that pervaded the Heroic Age was disappearing. Honor that came in the form of extolling the heroic virtues was losing its place to the notion that reason, and not sheer brute strength or clever cunning, was what made for a good life.

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