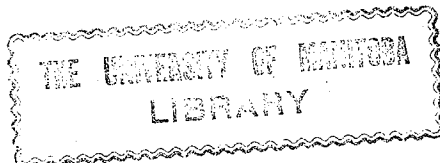


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- THE ETHICS OF THE HOMERIC AGE -



## THE ETHICS OF THE HOMERIC AGE

"And those illusions which excite the scorn  
Or, more, the pity of unthinking minds -  
Are they not mainly outward ministers  
Of inward conscience? with whose service charged  
They come, and go, appeared, and disappear,  
Diverting evil purposes, remorse  
Awakening, chastening an intemperate grief,  
Or pride of heart abating."

Wordsworth, Excursion.

Grote, in his History of Greece,<sup>1</sup> dogmatically asserts that Homer's poems were written for no didactic purpose. Philosophers might extract illustrative matter for exhortations, but the ethical doctrines which they applied must emanate subjectively from their own reflections. He goes on to say that the Homeric characters display virtues or infirmities, fierceness or compassion, with a sublime unconsciousness of any ideal standard by which to regulate their conduct. The author of the article on "Homer" in the Encyclopaedia Britannica goes further in banishing morals from the Homeric poems altogether. "Homer has no morality," he says. These, however, are sweeping assertions which need much qualifying before we can make them agree with facts.

It is true that we can find no formulated code of ethics in Homer. Ethics as a science had not been brought to the birth. Nevertheless, Homer had not only an ideal standard, but a far <sup>in some respects, more</sup> influential <sup>one</sup> than was in vogue during the times of the great Ethical philosophers of a later age. Because the ideal is implicit instead of

1. Vol. 2 pp 311-312, Everyman's Ed.

being explicit does not make it any the less really present, and the philosophers, who according to Grote make the ideal explicit by application to ordinary conduct, no more invent the ethical doctrines out of their own inner consciousness, than the miner creates the gold which he extracts from the vein or washes from the sands.

It is a well known fact that the poems of Homer were used not only as literary studies, but were also studied as the great, and we may safely assert the only, exponents of morality by the ancient Greeks and even Romans. What the Law and Prophets were to the Jews, what the Koran is to the Mahomedans, what the Bible is to the Christians, that the Homeric poems were to the Greeks.

The contention of Grote (that Homer wrote for no didactic purpose) contains its own refutation, when we take into consideration the office of the ancient bard. He was their historian as well as their poet and singer. To him alone the ancients looked, when writing was unknown or unpractised, to record the deeds of their heroes, or chronicle the peaceful pursuits of pastoral life in immortal verse, the best aid to memory possessed by an unlettered people. In this way the bard became their teacher and thus guided the habits of their uncultured minds, intellectually and morally.

Homer's own idea of the bard's office is a very high one. In his poems he portrays the bard as a moral teacher, having as sanctions for his teaching not merely human and mundane wisdom, but on the contrary having the sanction of direct divine inspiration.

In the *Odyssey* we are told Atrides leaves his fair young spouse in the care of the bard, and while she remains in his charge she continues virtuous and faithful. But when Aegisthus banishes the bard to a distant isle, then she falls away from virtue. When Penelope complains of the bard Phemius' mournful theme of the return of the Heroes from Troy when Athena vexed them with her storms, in the words:

"Thou knowest many other charms for mortals, deeds of Gods and men; I pray thee, change this piteous strain which consumes my heart within me!"<sup>1</sup> Whereupon Telemachus gently chides her, "Why dost thou grudge that the sweet minstrel should gladden us as his spirit moves him? When minstrels sing of woeful themes, it is not their fault; it is the fault of Zeus who sends the woes." Again Eumaeus employs this simile, "Even as when a man gazes on a minstrel, whom the gods have taught to sing words of yearning joy to mortals." (*Odys.* 17: 518)

These quotations clearly indicate the fact that the bard of ancient Greece, whom Homer represents, was a moral teacher divinely inspired by the Muses or by favor of some special God, and moreover, in consequence of this fact the people to whom he sang gave credence and obedience to his words. Plato in his "Protagoras" tells of us the educational value of Homer in his day. The boy who went to school first learnt his letters; as soon as he could read he had to study the poets. The teacher "sets before them" the works of the poets which they have to memorize.(2). The purpose of this was not only to form the boys' mind or literary taste, or to make him versed in traditionary lore; it was for the especial

1. *Odys.* 1:337 ff.

2. Plato *Prot.* 325 E.

purpose of teaching the morals inculcated by the poet, by setting before the youth the precepts ( *νοῦθες* ) in the poets and the example of deeds of heroes of ancient days "in order that the boy may emulate their examples and may strive to become such as they." ( *Protag.* 326 A.)

In the Symposium of Zenophon one of the guests says, "My father, anxious that I should become a good man, made me learn all the poems of Homer." "Homer, the prince of poets, has treated almost all human affairs. If any of you, then, wishes to become a prudent ruler of his house, or an orator, or a general, or to resemble Achilles, Ajax, Nestor or Odysseus, let him study Homer." (1) Further, Homer was used, as Isocrates bears witness, to keep alive national feelings (2). Plato made an effort to purify the grosser elements of the Homeric poems, which he considered as detrimental to the cause of a proper education; without success, however, as Dion Chrysostom in the first century bears witness that children were taught in his day as they had from the very beginning. (3)

Homer must have some didactic purpose or how can we account for the universal use of his poems among the Greeks in teaching morality to the young. His poem has some moral content; "Ex nihilo nihil fit."

The Author of the article "Homer" in the Britannica grudgingly admits that moral feeling is present in these poems, but that there are "no general principles of action and no words

1. Zenophon Symp. 3-6.                      2. Panegyricus paragraph 159  
3. Quoted by Jebb. Introd. to Hom. p 83.

that indicate that acts have been classified as good and bad, right or wrong; and he goes on to say that cruel and even treacherous deeds are spoken of without the least sense that they deserve censure. In answer to these objections it may be urged that Homer's teaching is strictly objective in its method. Homer is no speculative thinker. He knows nothing of the philosophical why and wherefore of the moral content. He put down thoughts and impressions as he sees them objectified before him. He knows right is right and wrong is wrong. He cannot or does not give a metaphysical reason for the facts. He simply sees the effect of actions in human life; and gives a rudimentary classification to those actions as pleasing or displeasing to the gods, as they bring weal or woe to the doers. Homer has two sanctions for human conduct; one is the will of the gods, the other natural law.

In answer to the second objection (that Homer does not condemn certain cruel and treacherous deeds) we may answer that the statement is only partly true. He sometimes condemns evil in words, and other times uses the picture itself to condemn the action. Many since the time of Plato have said much against the pictures of lust that Homer has introduced in his poems. We must not argue from this fact that Homer wishes to teach lustful passions, or that such passions are harmless. He pictures what was the common practice in those semi-barbaric days. The pictures are drawn with such a faithful hand, with such a noble purpose behind them, that they disgust the reader as he looks on them. He does not intend his readers to imagine that evil is just as much an ideal as virtue,

for wherever he draws a picture of lust, to counteract it he also draws as a foil the opposite virtue. Unconsciously he says with Hamlet "Look on this picture and on that." We cannot draw a picture without the dark shading, or paint one without the darker colors, so Homer, the first and best of moral teachers, could not fully teach the value of virtue without showing up the vanity of vice. Does he present us with an ideal of bravery as in Achilles? He also shows the opposite of it in the cowardice of the effeminate Paris. Does he wish to show us the beauty of chastity? He paints first the awful example of the adulteress Helen, despised even by her own self, and then immortalises conjugal fidelity and chaste affection in a Penelope or an Andromache. The loves <sup>(1)</sup> of Mars and Venus seem to be a blot on the purity of the Odyssey, but we must remember that Venus was really a foreign goddess, the patroness of the Trojans, and the subtilty of the poet in delineating the character of his own countrymen as the ideal heroes, and those of the Trojans as almost contemptible, is well brought out even in this disgusting picture, where Mars and Venus, who both fought for the Trojans, are held up to the ridicule of the whole court of the Olympian heaven. As a foil to this goddess of lust we have the picture of the chaste and wise Athene. "To the pure all things are pure" even the putrescence of Homer. It is only the vulture nose that smells <sup>only</sup> the carrion in every rosebed. His immoralities of gods and men are moral warnings to the world. Even his immoralities have a moral purpose behind them.

1. Odys. 8:266ff

It has been admitted, as we have seen, that there is moral feeling in Homer. This alone is admitted evidence of moral principles. We cannot have moral feelings without previously being taught by principles; in other words, moral feelings presuppose principles by which they are taught. Moral feeling might also be called the voice of conscience. Conscience is the criterion of actions, not the law of those actions. Conscience in all its operations presupposes a law; this law must be known. It is not necessary that it should be elaborately codified and minutely defined. The highest law is not necessarily a rigidly defined law; rather, it is one that is recognized. So the prophet in ancient times realized. His people already had the decalogue which clearly defined obligations categorically, but this is not the state of a perfect people he sees; a vision of the future consummation comes before him in which the laws will be put into their hearts and written on their minds. (1) But it is not the office of conscience by itself to give that knowledge. It can and does recognize those primary rudiments of it which result from our physical constitution, but it does not construct such codes or systems; these have to be taught it extraneously. When we confess a moral feeling in Homer we must at the same time admit principles, by reference to which moral feelings are ruled.

The author of the article aforesaid further admits that there was a term of ethical significance used by Homer in the word "aidos," but he objects to this as a rudimentary expression, because

1. Jeremiah 31, 33.



the word is used to express a good many meanings. But where will you find, search as you may the whole field of literature, a word that conveys and is so pregnant with so profound ethical truth as this simple word *aidos*? Where will you get a word to depict so universal a fact of moral consciousness. The English, and probably every other human language is incapable of translating this common Greek word. The nearest analogous word we have in English is the word "gentleman." We cannot define what a gentleman is; what his duties are; what his obligations are: but nevertheless the word stands for the highest ideal of manhood among the English speaking race. The mere fact of it being indefinable does not, however, insinuate that a gentleman has no principles, or ideal standard. We enshrine the word as the ideal of all that is manly and noble and good; and hold it up as an example to be followed by the younger generation, and as a foil and opposite of all that is petty and mean and ignoble. Such was the word "*aidos*" among the Greeks;- the sense of noble shame. Whenever a Greek sinned, he sinned against the "*aidos*." But the sense of noble shame itself presupposes something to be ashamed of; in other words, it suggests the existence of some principle or principles which acted as guides to the mind in discriminating what was shameful and what was not. This discriminating factor at once gives the lie to the contention that the Homeric hero had no distinct line separating right from wrong. The same author contends that the idea of law was foreign to Homer. If by law he means a codified set of rules, he may perhaps be right, although we can never be sure of this until it has been finally

demonstrated that ~~if~~ the Homeric Age was unacquainted with letters, or at least did not practice writing. But why should Homer be required to use nomos and rhetra, the later conceptions, instead of themis and dike? The objection that themis and dike are not true forensic terms because they mean custom, and the later conceptions, nomos and rhetra, are only the true legal expressions, is valueless when we consider that the nomoi were made up largely of customs. It is not necessary, as I have pointed out, that the laws should be written; a traditional law is just as unchangeable as a written law. The themistai were rules, whether written or unwritten, which were used in judgments and were probably as fixed as any written laws which we use today. These rules would no doubt be fixed by custom and precedent as the years went by, and being handed down acquired a sanction which new or changing laws could never have had. What is of supremest importance is that the laws should be known.

## II.

We know nothing of the history of the Homeric period. There is no extant literature by a contemporary writer, nor indeed had the science of history been invented. Herodotus, the so-called Father of History, did not appear on the scene till four centuries later. All we can gather of the history of the period is to be found in the pages of Homer; and internal evidence must be our guide, however imperfectly it is given to us. The history of the period being wrapped in obscurity we turn to

archaeology and philology to aid us with such scraps as we can pick up from these two sciences; with possibly a comparison with contemporary nations who may have influenced the Greek mind and customs. || <sup>it is surmised,</sup> As to the origin of these people, <sup>new paragraph.</sup> Somewhere in the central Asian (1) plateau there lived in ancient ages a tribe which possessed an acute mental vigour, combined with a robust manhood. They called themselves Aryans (2) which means, probably, "good family" in contradistinction to the semi-brute tribes by whom they were surrounded, and whom they drove out and replaced.

These Aryans as they multiplied spread themselves Westward and Southward in quest of newer pastures, for they were, like all primitive tribes, a pastoral people. One branch of the family migrated Southward to India and conquered and subdued the inhabitants of that fertile country; another spreading Northward and Westward, peopled <sup>Northern</sup> Persia, Asia Minor, and eventually crossed the sea to Greece, while another party of this same stock, after wandering North of the Black Sea, found their way into Northern Greece. This, at least, is the theory, and for want of better historical evidence, it is best to accept it as the most probable explanation of the arrival of the Aryan stock into Greece. (3)

But before the separation what civilization had they obtained? To this question philology supplies a partial answer. The study of Sanscrit in recent years has added a good deal to our knowledge of the habits of the early Aryans. Max Muller, a great

1. Cf. Max Muller, *Select Essays*, p. 204.
2. Some scholars would give a more European locality as the original home of the Aryans.
3. Cf. Murray's *History of Ancient Greece*.

authority on this subject, has pointed out by his comparative study of Sanscrit, Greek, and the Gothic tongues, a few facts well worth our notice. The evidence of comparative philology (1) goes to show that before the break-up of the Aryan family they had attained a comparatively high degree of civilization. The family relations of father, mother, son and daughter, and even relations by marriage, as son-in-law and daughter-in-law, were recognized. The words for ploughing ~~are~~ from the same root in Greek and Sanscrit: this, together with the similarity of the roots in the words for the principal domestic animals, such as ox, cow, pig, sheep, goat, donkey, goose, duck, point to the fact that not only did they practice agriculture, but had attained considerable proficiency in the domestication of animals. They were still a Nomadic people, however, or possibly it would be safer to say that a part of them were Nomadic. Those who could find fertile spots would no doubt settle down, while the younger members of the family, or those who had not been able to secure fertile spots, would continue to wander till they had secured, by conquest or occupation, a more favoured locality.

These people were acquainted with road-making and the art of bridge building, and also with the art of building houses and walls, whether for fortification against enemies or defence against wild animals, we do not know.

The conception of religion had taken firm root in the Aryan mind long before the separation. Comparing the name for the

1. Max Muller Select Essays pp 319-356