Greek Models *of* Mind *and* Self

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PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS based on lectures that I gave at Renmin University, Beijing, in May 2012. The university had recently established a biennial series of six master classes on ancient philosophy, and I had the great honor to be invited to deliver the second set of these. This was my first visit to the People's Republic of China. It was a thrill to have the opportunity of sharing my enthusiasm for Greek thought with the scholars and students of Renmin, and also with audiences at other Chinese universities, including Zhejiang, Fudan, and the University of Shanghai.

I drafted my lectures specifically for these occasions, but their topic, ancient Greek models of mind and self, has engaged me closely throughout my life as a teacher and scholar. Decades ago I undertook to write a book with this title for Harvard University Press. Over the years I published a large number of

articles on the subject in specialist journals, but the book itself eluded me. More than once I started to fulfill my old contract, but the complexity and scope of the subject were too daunting for me to complete the project. I had always wanted to present the material in ways that could engage a general audience, but successful books of that kind are much harder to write than learned monographs where an author can assume a good deal of background knowledge.

Renmin University's invitation gave me the opportunity and the incentive to try to overcome these scruples, and to honor my long-overdue obligations to Harvard University Press. This book is the result. It is a very small production, much smaller than I had projected years ago. It would be possible to write large volumes on each of my chapters' topics, and be equally expansive on related themes that I barely mention. But the smallness of the book may contribute, I hope, to its effectiveness. I have written it not for scholars but for anyone who is curious to explore the Greek genealogy of our western and, I dare say, cross-cultural language and thought about the mind and the self. I have written the book, moreover, not as a comprehensive survey of the field, but rather as a set of studies of the five topics indicated in my chapter headings. This selectivity will, I trust, give

readers new to the material sufficient detail and depth to make their own explorations with the help of the further readings I supply. A Chinese-language version of the book will be published by Peking University Press.

Many ancient authors, poets as well as philosophers, make their appearance here. Three of these predominate. They are Homer, Plato, and Epictetus, comprising ancient Greece's earliest and greatest poet, the culture's greatest philosopher, and the most accessible of Stoic philosophers, who spent his early life as a Roman slave. Chronologically the book ranges over a period of close to a millennium, but chronology and historical change are not my main focus. As I explain in the Introduction, what principally interest me are not scientific facts about the mind, supposing such truths to be accessible and demonstrable, but salient ways of describing and prescribing the way we experience, or might like to experience, the world and ourselves. The Greeks did not "discover" the mind, but they made a huge contribution to formulating the language and concepts of mind. That pertains, or so I will argue, no less to the epic poetry of Homer than it does to the explicit theories of Plato, Epictetus, and others. My conclusion, if such a grand word is applicable to so small a book,

is a recommendation to assess the mind models not comparatively, as if one model gets it right and the others not, but experientially, so as to judge their effectiveness at capturing and illuminating our own self-understanding and aspirations.

My warm thanks are due to many people, far more than I can name here. I should first mention Dr. Wei Liu of Renmin University. He masterminded my visit to Beijing and elsewhere in China, shepherding my wife and myself with extraordinary kindness. Among other Renmin scholars I am especially grateful to Professor Han Donghui, Associate Dean of the School of Philosophy, who issued my official invitation to give the master classes. Turning now to this book itself and to Harvard University Press, I thank Glen Bowersock for inviting me so long ago to contribute a volume to his Revealing Antiquity series. He could have nagged me over the years. Instead, he has generously welcomed the book's belated inclusion in his series. The original suggestion for the book came from a good friend, Patricia Williams, who was then working as an editor for Harvard University Press. She was succeeded by Peg Fulton. Peg did all she could to revive my interest in this project when it flagged. Lindsay Waters, Executive Editor for the Humanities at the Press, encouraged me to publish

TRANSLATIONS AND CITATIONS

UNLESS STATED otherwise, the translations from Greek authors are my own. References to them are in the standard form of book number, followed by line or section number. The following modern book is cited in abbreviated form:

LS *Hellenistic Philosophers* = A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers,* vol. 1: *Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary* (Cambridge, 1987).

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST PREMISE of this book is that understanding our selves—our natures, capacities, and possibilities—is the hardest thing in the world and yet endlessly fascinating because it cannot be finally settled by empirical research. There are no facts to decide, once and for all, whether the mind is part of the body, or whether it is a spiritual substance, or an epiphenomenon of the brain. We still do not know, in a scientific sense, what consciousness is. My second premise is that we can continue to discover aspects of our human possibilities or aspirations by means of the Greek material I want to explore. I don't mean that we can discover these things, in the way we are adding every day to scientific knowledge about the brain's neurons and synapses. What I mean is that we can enlarge and enrich experience by recognizing how Greek authors, prior to modern science, represented the thing that is both closest to us and yet is still, in some sense, quite mysterious—our own

essence as a human self. Many of their ideas are utterly remote from the individualistic and secular contexts of our body-centered market capitalism. That is all the more reason, or so I believe, for recovering these models of mind, irrespective of whether we can accommodate such thinking to modernity.

Intellectual historians have frequently taken themselves to be studying the *development* of concepts and ideas. Eduard Zeller, the great German historian of Greek philosophy, actually entitled his six-volume work *The Philosophy of the Greeks in Its Historical Development*.[1] A development is an unfolding, a growth, an evolution, a becoming clear or evident, an improvement or progress rather than a regression. Zeller approached the history of philosophy under the strong influence of Hegel, who understood human history as precisely a development in these senses, albeit a story that could involve intermittent descents as well as rises. This progressivist approach in the humanities, as distinct from the way we regard the physical sciences, is no longer fashionable. Nevertheless, because our experience throughout life follows the forward arrow of time, we can hardly avoid a tendency to think of the present as superseding the past, with the future promising new and different (if not better) vistas.

The developmental outlook is difficult to set aside. It is particularly treacherous, however, if it inclines interpreters to treat the subject matter of this book as something that evolves in increasingly clear and definite and superior ways. Mind, self, and human identity are always present to us, and precisely for that reason, they are exceptionally difficult to discern independently from our particular cultural and subjective perspectives. It has often been supposed that early Greek notions of these things are confused or unclear or primitive when compared with the explicit formulations made by the classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle. Viewed in this way, Homer, who composed his epic poetry some three or four centuries earlier, either lacked a coherent understanding of our mental and bodily constitution or had a muddled grasp of the psychology that Plato and Aristotle would later formulate with clarity.

In this book I strongly resist the notion that ideas about mind or self develop in the linear way that is supposed by taking Homer to be primitive and taking Plato, by comparison, to be advanced. Homer's psychology, the subject of my first chapter, is implicit rather than explicit; the models that it betokens are there for us to detect rather than laid out for our

used to talk that way, but his model for the structure or identity of his characters is unitary rather than binary. These figures have bodies, of course, and they have minds; they have limbs and organs; they think and they feel, intensely and with wonderful realism. But Homer's men and women, rather than being represented as embodied minds or as having a mind that is distinct from the body, are what I call psychosomatic wholes. They are infused throughout with life. Where they think and feel, and what they think and feel with, are as much parts of their general makeup as are their hearts and their guts. These features of Homeric persons do not, to repeat, imply that they are bodiless or mindless. It is just that Homer, or rather Homer's linguistic culture, saw no need to carve people up into two distinct entities or dimensions.

How then, and why did that happen? To put the question another way, why did subsequent Greek thinkers take it to be axiomatic, as they did, that human identity and selfhood presuppose a radical difference between the body and the mind? Or, to pose the question more precisely in Greek terms, why did they posit the *psyche* or soul as the center of consciousness and as the core of a human identity or character? I conclude my first chapter by returning to

Platonic dualism. The relationship between Platonists and Homer, which includes common ground as well as antithesis, sets up my context for the three ensuing chapters.

Chapter 2, "Intimations of Immortality," continues my earlier discussion of Homer and concludes with two of the earliest Greek philosophers, Empedocles and Heraclitus. The starting point for my discussion is Homer's emphasis on human mortality and Plato's remarkable ideas about the soul's preexistence and survival. Was Plato simply dreaming, or did he have cultural support for this gigantic disagreement with Greece's most authoritative text? To support the second alternative, I draw upon mythological material concerning gods and humans in the poetry of Hesiod, who was a near contemporary of Homer, and explore ideas about the postmortem destiny of souls presented by the fifth-century poet Pindar. I ask what cultural factors may have encouraged belief in an afterlife. Homeric characters are essentially mortal. They are survived by nothing more substantial than a ghost. If, on the other hand, human identity includes the presumption that an individual can survive death, the already living person requires something other than its mortal coil to be the constant and continuing center of itself, now

and hereafter. In that case are human beings simply human or are they related to divinity—or are they even fallen gods? Empedocles described the continuing self not as a *psyche* but as a *daimon,* a divine spirit. Thinkers who came after him drew on that word to designate the human mind and its rationality, as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5. Here again, in this supreme elevation of our intellectual powers, we find a remarkable difference from the Homeric outlook. It is a further sign of how our own modeling of the mind may be closer in some respects to Greek epic poetry than to Greek philosophy.

Are life and death, or mortality and immortality, polar opposites, or are they two sides of a continuum? In a series of cryptic statements that raise such questions, Heraclitus challenged inquiry into the deepest reaches of selfhood. Rather than looking to *psyche* as the bearer of moral identity and postmortem destiny (as we find in Pindar), Heraclitus formulated startlingly new assertions about the physical composition and power of the human *psyche* and about its function as the locus of mind and self.

By the end of the fifth century BCE, Greek authors, when talking about human nature, had begun to compare and contrast *psyche* with what has become the standard word for body *(soma),* meaning

our physical frame. When and why that comparison and antithesis became common linguistic practice we cannot say with any precision. We know it best and most influentially from the dialogues of Plato. Socrates (the historical figure, not just Plato's character) probably urged his contemporaries to cultivate their souls rather than their bodies, as Plato represents him as doing. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to translate that thought into Homeric Greek. Owing to Plato's philosophical depth and influence, we may be tempted into taking his accounts of the soul's excellence and capacity for self-control and intellectual integrity to be the truth of the matter, or at least generally acceptable to his culture, in its recognition of the mind's difference from the body.

Actually, Plato's account of the *psyche,* far from being "natural" or self-evident, would still have seemed highly controversial and implausible to many Athenians, especially those who recognized the power of demagogues to manipulate mass audiences. In my third chapter, "Bodies, Souls, and the Perils of Persuasion," I argue that the rhetorician Gorgias was a major catalyst in Plato's formative thinking and contrasts of soul and body. Gorgias argues that any audience can be manipulated by a supremely effective speaker.

In writing about Helen of Troy, Gorgias repeatedly contrasts the strength of bodies and bodily beauty with the weakness of souls to resist persuasive speech. That goes in the opposite direction from Plato, or at least what Plato would have his readers believe. Plato's extreme dualism, by which he pits the powers and excellence of the philosophical soul against the demands of the body, cannot be accounted for in a few pages of a modern book. However, the rhetorician Gorgias enables us to identify an important line of its genealogy. I show how the dualistic model fits Plato's manifesto to defend philosophy (for which Socrates was his hero) against rhetoric. This chapter concludes with the dialogue *Phaedo,* where Plato sets the scene of Socrates's last mortal day, and I adjoin a brief comparison and contrast with later philosophical treatments of the soul's relation to the body.

In Chapter 4 I take up a topic that I adumbrated at the end of Chapter 1, namely, Plato's division of the soul into three parts, each of them supposedly a distinct source of motivation—appetitive, emotive, and calculative. This psychological model differs from that of the *Phaedo* by transferring the unruly influence of the body to appetitive urges that are situated within the soul itself. I entitle this chapter "The Politicized Soul and the Rule of Reason." Prior

in spite of their historical distance, in a meaningful conversation. This dialogical endeavor, which is how I try to teach the material, explains my largest omission. All the major philosophers, especially Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics, have much to say about the physiological relation of the soul to the body. Why have I almost entirely bypassed this topic, after airing it in my first chapter on psychosomatic identity? Once the soul/body distinction became standard parlance among philosophers, they developed the language of mind in ways that are largely indifferent to the mind's physical constitution even if they thought that it was a part of the body. Whether the mind is an emergent property of atoms, as Epicurus proposed, or a function of the pneumatic material that energizes a living body, as the Stoics supposed, or an incorporeal entity, as in the Platonic tradition—irrespective of these great differences, the ancient models of mind are alike in their main agenda. Their physiology or metaphysics of the mind can tell us little or nothing about our mental experience today. But the concepts of mind they deployed and refined—rationality, irrationality, desire, passion, motivation, practical and theoretical thought—apply across the board and overstep history. They are our concepts now, and to that extent we still have Greek models of mind.

Further Reading

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Nightingale, A., and Sedley, D. (2010), eds., *Ancient Models of Mind: Studies in Human and Divine Rationality* (Cambridge, UK). This volume, largely composed by my former students, offers detailed studies of Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, and Plotinus.

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1

PSYCHOSOMATIC IDENTITY

WHAT IS THE nature of human beings? According to Plotinus, who asked this question, we humans live our lives simultaneously at two quite distinct levels.[1] One of these levels is obvious to everyone and not in doubt, no matter how we explain the details of human life. This obvious life is our everyday embodied experience, with our immediate desires, hopes, fears, thoughts, memories, expectations, and hourly activities. This is a life or being *in time* that everybody knows directly. The other level of life, according to Plotinus, is unobvious because it is everlasting and not accessible to normal consciousness. This other level, unlike the first one, is not our immediate, embodied experience. It is a purely intellectual life that consists timelessly in the contemplation of eternal truths. Plotinus infers that we have this further life on the basis of purely theoretical,

nonempirical considerations that have to do with understanding how and why there can be truths, as there are in mathematics, that never change and that transcend all particular points of view. What Plotinus calls the "we" (or the human self) straddles two levels, making us, as he says, "amphibious" or double. According to this conception we live simultaneously in both a physical, bodily, material, and temporal dimension and in a spiritual, immaterial, and immortal realm. For Plotinus, human beings are fully themselves, fully experience what it is to be human, only at this higher incorporeal and intellectual level. According to him, we should try, here and now, to identify ourselves with the life of the everlasting intellect, letting go of the body and embodied consciousness as much as possible. Thus, to Plotinus, human nature is uncompromisingly dualistic, with body and mind essentially different things.

In this respect, as in so many other ways, the outlook of Plotinus is a complete contrast with the sensuous immediacy and concreteness of Greece's epic poet, Homer. When the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were first written down in about 700 BCE, close to a thousand years before the birth of Plotinus, the two poems

became at once the earliest and the greatest literary creations of ancient Greece. The heroes of these epics, Achilles and Odysseus, are intensely conscious of their present embodied and time-governed existence, and they are equally conscious of their social identity and high rank as warrior chieftains. These heroes have no inkling of a second level of timeless being, a higher intellectual and immortal level, such as Plotinus envisioned. For Achilles and Odysseus, what matters—as it continues to matter for all of us, nearly thirty centuries later—is how one fares here and now, in the succession of days, what one feels and what one desires, how one succeeds and where one fails. Achilles and Odysseus envision nothing like immortality or an amphibious self divided between body and mind. The life of the Homeric heroes is an intensely physical existence, and it will be completely and irrevocably over when they die. Indeed, one of Homer's most characteristic terms for human beings is "mortals" *(brotoi)* to contrast us with "immortals" *(athanatoi),* meaning gods. Yet, something of the Homeric human being will persist after death, something that Homer calls the *psyche.*

Is this *psyche* an entity or a nonentity? One is tempted to call it a nonentity because it is insubstantial and

> Next I saw the shade *(eidolon)* of mighty Hercules. But he himself takes delight in feasting with the immortal gods.

Plotinus comments (*Ennead* 1.1.12):

> Homer seems to separate Hercules from his mere image. He puts his image [or shade] in Hades, but Hercules himself among the gods; treating the hero as existing in the two realms at once, he gives us a twofold Hercules.

Here Plotinus updates Homeric mythology by interpreting it as an indication of his own dualistic system with its stark distinctions between soul or mind and body. Hercules, with Zeus as his father and Alcmene as his mother, had been traditionally perceived as a demigod—a composite of the human and the divine. This complex parentage explained how Hercules, the man, could die and pass to Hades as a shade, while his divine essence (what Homer calls "Hercules himself") joined the immortal gods. In this traditional story Plotinus saw the kernel of his own remarkable doctrine already described—the idea of an amphibious or bifurcated identity for everyone, divided between a mortal body and a higher self, a self that is everlasting and focused entirely on the life of the mind.

When Greek philosophers reflected on ethics and theology, they found much to criticize and reject in Homer. But Homeric epic was so powerful and entrenched in Greek culture that no major philosopher could completely escape its influence, even a philosopher as abstract as Plotinus. Homer was an inescapable catalyst for all ancient philosophy, especially the notions of mind, self, and identity that I will discuss in this book. The poems of Homer not only set the stage for my project, they also provide recurrent themes for subsequent authors to develop, react against, or even appropriate, as we have just seen.

Homer, of course, did not pose abstract questions by asking, as Plotinus did directly, about the nature of human beings. The Homeric epics are intended to appeal to our emotions, not our intellects. But all Greek philosophers recognized Homer's richness for anyone's inquiry into the foundations of human identity. Around the time of Plotinus, an author (incorrectly identified as Plutarch) wrote a work on Homer in which he attempted to show, through a series of quotations, that Homer was the source of many specific doctrines of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Pythagoras, Aristotelians, and Stoics. Plutarch, as this author is called, makes much of his case by reading between the lines in ways that

no one today would find convincing.[4] But his points are sometimes quite appropriate: he correctly notes that Stoic philosophers followed Homer in their account of the way life, breath, and heart are connected, and he shows that Homer could distinguish between fate and human responsibility for actions performed deliberately.[5] Plutarch goes quite astray in making Homer the source of *all* Greek philosophy, but he was right to align many Homeric contexts with ideas that subsequent philosophers had elaborated. One representative of this practice is Pyrrho, the eponymous founder of the version of skepticism called Pyrrhonism. We are told that Pyrrho had a habit of quoting Homeric passages to corroborate his own views on the uncertainty of everything.[6]

My interest in Homer, for the purpose of this chapter, is twofold. I want to illustrate and explain Homer's understanding of what we today call human physiology and psychology. In this part of the discussion my focus will be on objective features of human identity that belong to all human beings as a species. My second interest in Homer concerns notions that involve value and subjectivity, notions about the character and activity of an individual life—the things that make a life worthwhile or

wretched, within or beyond an agent's control, intelligent or senseless. These notions pertain to Homeric contexts such as the anger of Agamemnon and Achilles, Odysseus's strategy in reclaiming his kingly position at Ithaca, and Penelope's steadfast refusal to accept rumors concerning Odysseus's death.

How do these two topics fit together—objective identity on the one hand and, on the other hand, subjectivity, individuality, and value? To answer this question I need to develop a theme that will be important throughout the book—the distinction already mentioned between body and soul or, to be more precise, the distinction often expressed in Greek between *soma* and *psyche,* which is the word that gave rise to our modern term *psychology.* Homer has both these words. As we saw in my opening remarks on Plotinus, Homer uses *psyche* to refer to the breath or spirit that leaves persons when they die and that persists as a ghost in Hades. *Soma* is Homer's word for the lifeless corpse that the *psyche* leaves behind. Do *living* humans, then, in Homer consist of a *soma* that contains a *psyche?* The answer may seem to be obviously yes. For how else could it make sense to say that death occurs when you breathe out your *psyche,* leaving a corpse behind? But the linguistic facts are a bit more complicated.[7]

Many languages and cultures make sharp distinctions between the living body, meaning our anatomical parts and structure, and something they call the soul or the spirit. According to this distinction the soul or spirit is taken to be the source of embodied life and, in particular, the seat and cause of thought, feeling, and consciousness. Such a distinction between body and soul became the standard practice of ancient Greek philosophers, and it soon made its way into the general culture. We could accurately describe the Greek ethical tradition from Socrates onward as a focus on care of the soul as distinct from care of the body. As we shall see in later chapters, models of self and personal identity in Greek philosophy take a distinction between soul and body to be basic to an understanding of human nature in general and also to an understanding of the mental and moral differences between people. Many Greek philosophers (Aristotle is a partial exception) have what we may call a thing-like view of soul or *psyche*. In general, they assign a definite location within the body to *psyche,* sometimes by dividing it into specific parts. In so doing, they treat *psyche* in much the same way as we moderns do when we speak of the head or the brain.

We might expect that Homer anticipated this seemingly natural distinction, but most scholars say