'An absolute tour de force. I can imagine it replacing Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* on many a bookshelf – certainly mine.'
TOM HOLLAND

THE QUEST FOR A MORAL COMPASS

A GLOBAL HISTORY *of* ETHICS

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Contents

CHAPTER ONE

On the capriciousness of gods and the tragedy of Man

1

> Sing, goddess, of the anger of Achilleus, son of Peleus, the accursed anger which brought uncounted anguish on the Achaians and hurled down to Hades many mighty souls of heroes, making their bodies the prey to dogs and the birds' feasting; and this was the working of Zeus' will. Sing from the time of the first quarrel which divided Atreus' son, the lord of men, and godlike Achilleus.[1]

So opens the most celebrated work of Greek poetry, the earliest expression of European literature, and, to some, its greatest too. Homer's *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War, the ten-year struggle by Achaean Greeks to avenge the abduction of Helen, wife of Menelaus, the king of Sparta, by Paris, son of the Trojan king Priam. (The Achaeans were the first Greek-speaking inhabitants of what we now call Greece.) The *Iliad* forms one half of a poetic diptych with the *Odyssey*, in which Homer recounts the tale of Odysseus' struggle to return home after the fall of Troy, a struggle that was to last as long as the war itself.

Written in the eighth century BCE, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are distilled from a long and rich tradition of oral poetry, the work of generations of illiterate singers in an illiterate age who composed and passed on their epics of men and gods, love and death, adventures and conquests, without the aid of writing. Over centuries these tales melded together into a stock of myths that gave the audience that

listened to the itinerant poets a sense of time and place. The Homeric poems were both the culmination of this tradition and its transformation, works that drew upon the oral lore but whose depth of vision, breadth of imagination, and sheer ambition gave voice to a new kind of literature and to a new kind of myth. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* gave ancient Greeks a sense of their history, turned a fable about their origins into the foundation stone of their culture, nourished generations of poets and sculptors and artists and established a framework for their moral lives. It is a good place from which to embark on our journey of exploration through the history of moral thought.

The *Iliad* is a poem about the Trojan War. And yet it is not a poem about the Trojan War. The beginnings of the conflict and the sacking of Troy both lie offpage. The whole story of the *Iliad* is contained within a span of fifty-two days in the tenth and final year of the war. The main action, running through twenty-two of the poem's twenty-four books, occupies just four days.

The quarrel of which Homer speaks in the opening line of the *Iliad* is not the quarrel between the Greeks and the Trojans, but that between Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces, and Achilles, son of the goddess Thetis and the most famous of the Greek warriors. Homer begins his tale by telling of how Chryses, priest to the god Apollo, asks Agamemnon to allow him to ransom his daughter Chryseis whom the Achaean king had captured as a war trophy and claimed as a slave. When Agamemnon rudely rejects him, Chryses prays to Apollo for help. Apollo sends a plague upon the Greeks. To pacify the god, an assembly of Greek warriors demands that Agamemnon return his slave girl to Chryses. Agamemnon agrees, but only if he be given, in exchange, Achilles' concubine, Briseis, another prize captured in war. Humiliated and dishonoured, Achilles withdraws himself and his warriors from the conflict.

Agamemnon's 'wicked arrogance' and the 'ruinous wrath' of Achilles provide the raw material for Homer. His theme is not the war but the tragedy of the human condition, the unintended consequences of human sentiment and the nature of fate in governing human life. All the major dramatic moments of the poem spring fatefully and inevitably from the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. With Achilles out of the battle, Hector, brother of Paris, successfully breaches the Greek camp, with backing from the gods. Achilles' closest friend, Patroclus, who had also withdrawn from the war, re-enters the fray, dressed in Achilles' armour. He manages to repel the Trojans but is killed in battle by Hector. In revenge, a distraught Achilles defeats Hector in single combat, then defiles his corpse for days, until King Priam persuades him to give up the body. The *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral. The death of Achilles and the fall of Troy

lie outside the narrative of the poem. But we know that both will happen, for they are as inevitable as were the deaths of Patroclus and Hector, two more moments in the unbroken sequence that had sprung from Achilles' anger.

'And so the plan of Zeus was fulfilled,' Homer writes of the consequences of Achilles' wrath. Achilles' 'accursed anger' had set forth a train of events that had 'brought uncounted anguish on the Achaeans and hurled down to Hades many mighty souls of heroes'. But both that anger and that train of events were also part of a divine plan. Throughout the *Iliad*, divine and human causation are inextricably linked. Achilles and Agamemnon are responsible for their actions. They – and not just they – have to pay the price for their pride, arrogance and folly. And yet their actions are shaped by the gods, and their fates decided by Zeus' scales.

The drama on the battlefield is shadowed by the drama on Mount Olympus. We see the gods holding council, quarrelling and sulking, laughing and partying and making love, and descending from their Olympian heights to change the course of human affairs. When Achilles is dishonoured by Agamemnon, his distraught mother, the goddess Thetis, appeals to Zeus, who promises her major Trojan success so as to 'bring honour to Achilles'. As Paris is about to be defeated by Menelaus in a duel he has foolishly called, Aphrodite 'snatched him away with the ease of a god, wrapped him in thick mist, and set him down in his sweetly-scented bedroom'. When Hera, the wife of Zeus, who has championed the Achaeans, protests about her husband's support for the Trojans, he accepts that she can have her way and see Troy sacked but also issues a warning: 'Whenever I in my turn am eager to destroy a city peopled by men who are dear to you, do not try to thwart my anger, but let me have my way.'[2]

Homer's gods are not wise and judicious like the later gods of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Rather, they are capricious, vain, vicious and deceitful. But however savage and immoral the gods may be, they are also all-powerful, or seemingly so to humans. It is in part a reflection of the world as the Ancients saw it: messy, chaotic, largely unpredictable, barely controllable, and yet inescapable. Not only have human choices to be made against the background of divinely ordered fate, but the gods often force humans to act against their wishes. Perhaps no figure better expresses the conundrum of human choice than Helen, whose abduction launched the Trojan War. Trojans hold Helen responsible for the war and for the suffering that it has brought. Helen herself accepts responsibility for the tragedy. And yet she, and Homer, recognize that she has been manipulated by divine forces, and in particular by Aphrodite, who had engineered Helen's initial seduction by Paris.

In one poignant passage, Aphrodite tries to force Helen into Paris'

bed against her will, to comfort the Trojan prince. ‘Go sit by him yourself,’ Helen retorts, ‘abandon the paths of the gods, never again turn your feet back to Olympus; no, stay with him, for ever whimpering around him and watching over him, until he makes you his wife – or else his slave.’ ‘I will not go to him,’ Helen insists, for ‘that would bring shame on me’ and ‘I have misery enough in my heart’.[3] Yet, however much she detests the goddess’s imperatives, Helen knows that she is powerless to resist them. She follows Aphrodite to Paris’ bedroom.

This, for Homer, is the tragedy of being human: to desire freedom, and be tortured by a sense of autonomy, and yet be imprisoned by forces beyond our control. Fate, to Homer, is a social reality, and neither will nor cunning can evade it. Indeed, a man who does what he ought to moves steadily towards his fate and his death. Achilles and Hector go into battle knowing they are fated to die, but knowing, too, that without surrendering to their fate they would also surrender their honour.

With tragedy, however, comes dignity. Gods act according to whim; only humans are truly accountable for their actions. Human life is framed by the gods and yet humans cannot rely upon them. They must depend upon their own wit and resources. It is human reason that imposes order upon an unpredictable world, and discovers dignity and honour within it.

The fraught relationship between Man and God lies at the heart not just of Homer’s work, nor even just of Greek philosophy, but also at the heart of all moral thought. In part, the history of moral thought is the history of attempts to address the problem of reconciling fate and free will. It is a dilemma with which not just believers but atheists, too, have been forced to wrestle. When ‘we feel ourselves to be in control of an action’, the contemporary neuroscientist Colin Blakemore has suggested, ‘that feeling itself is the product of our brain, whose machinery has been designed, on the basis of its functional utility, by means of natural selection.’ According to Blakemore, ‘To choose a spouse, a job, a religious creed – or even to choose to rob a bank – is the peak of a causal chain that runs back to the origin of life and down to the nature of atoms and molecules.’[4]

For Blakemore, unlike for Homer, fate lies not in the hands of gods but in the nature of atoms and molecules. But the same questions are raised about human actions. If all action is predestined, what could free will mean? Or ethics? From the beginnings of the philosophical tradition to the latest thoughts on neuroscience, the questions of fate and free will have been inextricably bound together in an ethical knot. Part of the story of the quest for a moral compass is the story of the attempts to untie that knot, to understand it, to live with it.

2

As Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over the slave girl Briseis at the council of warriors, the ageing King Nestor intervenes. ‘You, *agathos* though you are,’ he tells Agamemnon, ‘do not take the girl from him, but let her be, as the sons of the Achaians gave her to him in the beginning as his prize.’ Then turning to Achilles, Nestor warns, ‘Do not seek open quarrel with the king, since there is no equality with the honour granted to a sceptred king, whom Zeus has glorified. You may be a man of strength, with a goddess for your mother, but he is more powerful because his rule is wider.’[5]

The *Iliad* provided the ancient Greeks with a framework within which to understand the hopes and sorrows that shaped their lives. It told of the desires of Man, the capriciousness of gods and the implacability of fate, and of how all three knitted together. Homer’s epic was not, however, just a way of making sense of the tragedy of the human condition. It was also a way of understanding how to meet the challenge of being human. Nestor’s speech gives us a glimpse of the moral rules by which Homer’s heroes lived.

The Greek word αγαθος (*agathos*), which Nestor uses to describe Agamemnon, is often translated as ‘good’, in the sense of an action or a trait that is morally admirable. It is also, in Homer, a description of a person’s standing. Indeed, in Nestor’s speech, *agathos* is often rendered in English as ‘great man’. In Agamemnon’s world, a man’s social status and his moral worth are almost indistinguishable.

In premodern societies, and especially in ‘heroic’ societies at the edge of historical records such as that which Homer describes, the structure of society is a given, as is the role that each individual occupies and the privileges and duties that derive from that role. A person knows who he is by knowing his role within society, and in knowing this he knows also what he owes and what is owed to him by every other individual.

Being king gives Agamemnon his *agathos*. Yet possessing *agathos* does not stop him taking Briseis. Nor does his taking of Briseis undermine his *agathos*. Agamemnon is to be judged – and defined – solely by his ability to be kingly. To be kingly one had to possess not just kingly virtues such as courage, cunning, military skill and the ability to command men, but also the wealth and leisure necessary for the development of such character and skill. To be good one must be born into a good family. The greater one’s nobility, the greater one’s goodness. Achilles may have been dishonoured by Agamemnon’s action, but his honour, as Nestor points out, could never be equal to that of Agamemnon because he is not king, and nor could his goodness equal Agamemnon’s.

Ordinary folk cannot, it seems, be good at all. The duties of a

swineherd or a miller, as much as those of Agamemnon or Achilles, derive from the roles they occupy within the given structure of a community. Unlike for Agamemnon and Achilles, the rules that assign their roles and define their duties also determine that in lacking nobility they also lack *agathos*.

The *Iliad* is clearly a moral tale. But it describes an alien moral world, not simply because its moral rules are so different from those of our world but also because its very notion of what constitutes a moral rule is alien to us. When, as modern readers, we enter Homer's world, it is almost inevitable that we pass judgements upon his characters that are different from those of Homer himself. Paris is a kidnapper, a shirker, a man whom we would probably describe as morally dissolute. Homer would not portray him as such. Even though Paris fails to perform the actions of a good man, he remains good in Homer's eyes because his hereditary gifts, social background and material advantages embody such an important part of his *agathos*.

Agamemnon's pride and arrogance led to the tragedy of the Trojan War. To a modern reader, this places upon him a moral responsibility for the conflict. To Homer, Agamemnon's pride and arrogance are a matter not of morality but of fate. 'I am not to blame,' Agamemnon insists, the gods 'put a cruel blindness in my mind at the assembly on that day when by my own act I took away his prize from Achilleus.'[6]

In the modern world, morality is inseparable from choice. Homer's warriors cannot choose to be moral or not. Each is simply good or bad at performing the duties of his role. Human choice adds texture to the cloth already woven on the loom of fate, but cannot unpick the threads. There is in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* only the faintest glimmer of what we would recognize as free will or choice. Indeed, it is not clear that any of Homer's characters possess a 'mind' as we understand it, nor an interior life. In Homer's epics, the psychologist David Olson observes, 'there is an absence of such terms as "decided", "thought", "believed", "doubted" or "equivocated".'[7] Homer's characters do all of these things, but not in the self-conscious way that we do them. Agamemnon's wrath and Achilles' pride describe not emotions inside their selves, but their actions and the actions of the gods that determine their fate.

Lacking a concept of an interior life, Homer turns that life into a spectacle of gods in battle over the human world. He cannot access the drama inside the human head, because he possesses no language through which to understand it. So the drama takes place outside human life through the gods' quarrels, loves, obsessions and desires. Hence the humanness of Homer's gods. So beautifully wrought is that divine drama that in the modern world we continually plunder it for metaphors through which to understand our own desires and

motivations – think of the importance to modern psychoanalysis of Oedipus and Narcissus, Prometheus and Antigone.

Homer was wrestling with no mere metaphor. The inner world was opaque to him, but the divine world was a reality. Homeric gods form the cosmic intelligence that drives the universe. They form also the inner intelligence that drives every human being. The gods inhabit our heads as well as heaven.

Over time, the inner world became more transparent, but the divine world more opaque. The drama played out in myth was both an attempt to make sense of a disorderly world and an acceptance that such a world is too disorderly to make sense of. Increasingly philosophers discovered order in the world, and the rules by which nature was organized and that made natural events predictable. As the cosmos appeared more ordered and predictable, so the plurality of gods acting on whim and caprice came to be replaced with a single Creator who governed with reason and judgement. In time that single Creator was Himself dethroned and replaced by a mechanical universe. Just like the outer world, the inner world, too, came to be seen as ordered and, to a degree, predictable. At the same time, humans came increasingly to be seen as *agents* – wilful beings with minds of their own.

The moral world bound by myth is different to that embodied in religion or that which makes sense in a world that entrusts to science. Moral thought does not inhabit a sealed-off universe. It cannot but be closely related to the social structure of a community and to the perceptions within it of what it is to be human. Homeric values emerged from the structure of heroic society, shaped by its needs and constrained by its particular conception of human nature. As society changed, and as new languages developed through which to understand the human soul, the human mind and humanity's place in the cosmos, so inevitably moral ideas also evolved.

3

Aeschylus' magnificent *Oresteian* trilogy begins where the *Iliad* ends. Troy has fallen. Greek warriors are returning home. The first play, *Agamemnon*, opens with Clytemnestra, wife of the Greek king and sister of Helen, awaiting her husband's homecoming in the city of Argos. She is brimming with fury and rage. Ten years previously, on the eve of the war, Agamemnon had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to placate the gods and ensure favourable winds. Now Clytemnestra wants revenge. The play climaxes with the brutal murder of Agamemnon, his wife hacking him down with an axe, as if she

were ritually sacrificing an animal.

In *The Choephoroi*, the second of the *Oresteian* plays, Agamemnon's son Orestes, who has lived his life in exile, returns to Argos at Apollo's command to avenge his father. He is faced with a terrible dilemma: murder his mother or leave his father unavenged. He kills both Clytemnestra and her lover.

In the final part of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, Orestes is pursued by the Furies, ancient pre-Olympian deities, more hag-like than god-like, whose role was to exact vengeance for major sins: blasphemy, treachery and the shedding of kindred blood. Orestes finds refuge in Athens where, on the Acropolis, Athena convenes a jury of twelve to try him.

Apollo acts as attorney for Orestes, while the Furies become advocates for the dead Clytemnestra. The jury is split. Athena casts her vote in favour of acquittal, a verdict that enrages the Furies, who accuse her, Apollo and the other 'young gods' of usurping the power of the older divinities whom they represent. Athena eventually wins them over, renaming them *Eumenides* (the Kindly Ones), and assuring them that they will now be honoured by the citizens of Athens.

Aeschylus wrote the *Oresteia* in the middle decades of the fifth century BCE. This was the dawn of the era of 'classical Greece', an era which saw an extraordinary flourishing of art, architecture and philosophy, and at the heart of which stood the city of Athens. In the 800 years between the fall of Troy and the rise of Athens there had been a great transformation in Greek life. Not long after the sacking of Troy, the Mycenaean civilization, to which Homer's Achaean warriors belonged, itself collapsed, through a combination of economic decline, internal strife and invasion. The invaders were Dorians, like the Achaeans a Greek-speaking people from the north; their arrival ushered in what is often called the Greek Dark Ages. The kingdoms of Mycenaean Greece gave way to a more fragmented landscape of small, independent regions based around kinship groups. Famine led to the abandonment of cities. Art and culture became denuded. Written language seems to have disappeared.

Not for another three centuries, until the beginning of the eighth century BCE, is there evidence of economic recovery. With a rise in population, a new form of social organization, the city state, or polis, begins to develop out of the kinship-based communities. Cultural life re-emerges. A new alphabet is adopted from the Phoenicians. One of its first exponents is Homer.

'Polis' meant to the ancient Greeks much more than 'city state' means to us. It carried a spiritual sense and embodied a sense of 'home' and belonging. It embodied also the sense that only through membership of the polis was humanity raised above the level of barbarism. Most of the new city states began as monarchies. Through

the eighth century many overthrew their kings and evolved into oligarchies, ruled largely by their wealthiest citizens. A few – most notably Athens – took the oligarchic experiment further, turning themselves into democracies. These were not democracies in a modern sense – women, foreigners and slaves were, for instance, all disbarred from governance. Athenian democracy nevertheless expressed the impulse that 'rule by the many' was better than 'rule by the few', an impulse that was to shape all progressive thought in the centuries that followed.

Athens had, by the beginning of the fifth century BCE, displaced Sparta as the dominant Greek city state, in large part because of its role in thwarting the ambitions of the Persian Empire. Twice, in 490 BCE and again ten years later, Persian forces attempted to invade the Greek mainland. Twice they were beaten back, thanks in great measure to Athenian naval prowess. Success in the Persian Wars brought with it not just prestige but wealth and power too. This wealth and power, together with the city's democratic reforms, attracted to Athens artists and philosophers from all over Greece. It also created a leisure class able to afford them patronage. The result was an extraordinary explosion of intellectual energy. Socrates and Plato, Aristotle and Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, Herodotus and Xenophon, Thucydides and Aristophanes, Phidias and Praxiteles – some of the greatest philosophers, playwrights, poets and sculptors lived in the city in the two centuries that followed Athens' triumph.

Presiding over this intellectual pantheon was still the ghost of Homer. The virtues that made for a good citizen in a city in which all 21,000 free men of the right age could sit in the decision-making Assembly were necessarily different to those that had driven aristocratic warriors to submit to heroic fate. For Homer, honour was bound with nobility. In democratic Athens, the power of the nobility was constrained by the Assembly, and there existed a moral equality between commoners and nobles previously unknown. How could a moral code crafted in an age of warriors and heroes translate into an age of philosophers and democrats? Why should there be a moral equality between commoners and nobles? And what could justice mean when it was no longer linked to a warrior's search for honour? These were the questions that Aeschylus addressed in his *Oresteian* trilogy.

The Furies, in the *Oresteia*, represent the old virtues of Homer, rooted in honour, blood and revenge. Athena embodies the new civic virtues of Athens, the determination to apply reason and the democratic spirit, rather than arbitrary divine fiat, to the application of justice. For Aeschylus, the Furies are arbitrary in their moral judgement – they condemn Orestes for the murder of Clytemnestra but not Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon. They refuse to

acknowledge the moral dilemma in which Orestes was placed, and they fail to recognize that justice cannot always be dispensed by following a set law. Athena's judgement is righteous because she recognizes both the fallibilities of humans and the dilemmas that they face.

Like Homer, Aeschylus understands the human condition as tragic, caught as humans are between a yearning for freedom and the necessity of fate. The citizens of fifth-century Athens are, however, freer than the inhabitants of twelfth-century Troy. Their yearning for freedom has been given concrete expression in the political structures of democratic Athens. The moral code has, therefore, to reflect these new ideas of human sovereignty. Aeschylus does not want, though, to detach himself entirely from either Homer's world or the ancient deities. He views human life as lived in the shadow of the gods and accepts fate as a fact of life. Not only are some questions too difficult for humans to resolve – Athena herself, after all, has finally to decide Orestes' fate – but the Furies must not be discarded; rather they must be given an honourable, though different, role in the new moral cosmos. In democratic Athens, Greeks were freer than they had been in heroic Troy. But greater freedom only made even sharper the tragic condition in which humans find themselves.

4

The 800 years between the fall of Troy and the rise of Athens did not just see a transformation in what Greeks considered were virtues or in how they imagined the good life. Those eight centuries saw also a transformation in the very way that people came to reflect upon morality.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* provided a means by which ancient Greeks made sense of their moral lives. They were, however, works of poetry, not of philosophy. Homer articulated no comprehensive philosophical framework, but imagined a story within which his readers, and listeners, found both an explicit history and an implicit morality. The history and the morality made sense because Homer shared with his audience an understanding about gods, fate and how they worked. As Achilles battles with Hector, Odysseus speaks with the dead in the Underworld, or Hera seduces Zeus while Poseidon rouses the Achaean army, so the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* extend that common story and infuse it with new meaning. Myth gave moral texture to people's lives, made manifest their sense of wonderment and fear and helped link their particular lives with the eternal.

From the sixth century BCE, a new kind of moral account began to

develop in which ideas about what constituted a virtuous act or a good life were not implicitly crafted, and intuitively grasped, through the narrative of myth, but explicitly established through rational argument. These new accounts did not so much tell stories as ask questions. What is a virtue? Why should I behave virtuously? Why is justice good? And they answered such questions not by turning to their foundational myths but by attempting to reason from first principles. This was the emergence of philosophy as distinct from poetry and mythology.

The first of the new breed of thinkers who, in Aristotle's words, 'spoke by demonstration' rather than 'invent clever mythologies' came to be called the 'Presocratics', because they had the misfortune, as Anthony Gottlieb has put it, 'of being born before Socrates'.[8] Both the Ancients and modern philosophers came to see Socrates as the man with whom philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, began. Socrates was, as we shall see, a key turning point in the history of moral thought. The Presocratics were, however, far more than the *amuse bouche* to set before the Socratic feast. They were little interested in questions of morality, being captivated more by 'numbers and movements, with the problem whence all things came, or whither they returned', as Cicero was later to put it.[9] But in investigating 'the problem whence all things came, or whither they returned', the Presocratics began to develop a way of thinking about the universe, and of humanity's place in it, that was to have a profound impact on moral thought.

The earliest of the Presocratics was Thales, born in Miletus, on the Anatolian coast of what is now Turkey, around 580 BCE; the last was Democritus who survived Socrates by some twenty years. As they left only fragments of original work, almost all we know of them and their ideas comes through the comments of later philosophers, especially Aristotle, Plato and Theophrastus. They were not a homogeneous group. Some, like Anaximander and Heracletes, saw the world as a manifestation of divine justice. Others, such as Leucippus and Democritus, saw no place for a divine presence in the cosmos. What connected them all was a commitment to explain the world in terms of its own inherent principles. Unlike Homer, who viewed the world as fundamentally disorderly, the Presocratics saw order everywhere. The apparent chaos of the world concealed a permanent and intelligible organization, which could be accounted for by universal causes operating within nature itself. The best tool to discern such order was the human mind.

The Presocratic thinkers set out to explain the stuff of which the world was made and the principles by which that stuff interacted. This has led some to describe them as the 'first scientists'. They were not.

The Presocratics did not observe nature and draw conclusions from their observational data in the manner of a modern scientist. They speculated largely about the unobservable – the origin and destruction of the world, the nature of the heavenly bodies, the causes of motion and change. Their arguments can often seem as wild, visionary and mystical as those of Homer. Anaximenes defined the primary substance from which all is made as air which through 'rarefaction and condensation … manifests in different forms in different things'. Anaximander thought the earth was 'cylindrical in shape, and three times as wide as it is deep'. Anaxagoras believed that 'Mind ordered all the things that were to be.'[10]

Such tales about the origins and functioning of the universe may seem to have more in common with creation myths than with rational cosmology. They were, in fact, a dramatic breakthrough; not because of what they told us about the cosmos, but because of what they told us about ourselves as human beings. To understand the world, the Presocratics argued, we need to go beyond the observable and comprehend the underlying principles at work. These underlying principles could not be explained through divine action that, by definition, was not regular and ordered, but capricious and unpredictable. Such principles had, the Presocratics insisted, to be both naturalistic and reductionist. Naturalistic because phenomena had to be explained without recourse to divine intervention but only by reference to natural causes and events; reductionist because complex phenomena could be understood in terms of simpler processes, and explanations of the world should rely on as few principles as possible. In a sense, the Presocratics depended as much on faith as did Homer, but it was a different kind of faith: faith that the world was ordered in such a way that it could be intelligible to reason; and faith in the capacity of reason to make sense of the ordered world. They did not know that the world was so ordered, or that reason was so capable. They simply believed it. And in believing it, they helped transform the way in which humans came to think about the world and their place in it.

Not just the natural world but human affairs, too, were, for the Presocratics, ordered by laws and regularities. Few concerned themselves with questions of human behaviour. However, their belief that human life could be studied like the stars and the stones influenced others, most notably Herodotus. Born around 485 BCE in the colony of Helicarnassus, near Bodrum in present-day Turkey, not far from Troy, he lived in the disputed borderland between Greece and Persia. It was to be the wars between the two, which began in 499 BCE and lasted for almost half a century, that formed the heart of his *Histories*, often seen as the first true historical work. Like Almásy's notebook in Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, the *Histories* is

cut and pasted from stories, observations, anecdotes and thoughts. It is, however, unlike any previous histories. Herodotus did not merely rely on myth to recreate the past; he attempted systematically to collect historical data and, to a degree, test their accuracy.

The language of Herodotus, and the manner of his tales, are rooted in the Homeric tradition. The *Histories* is an epic poem rendered in prose. 'I see him', Almásy tells Hana in *The English Patient*, 'as one of those spare men of the desert who travel from oasis to oasis, trading legends as if it is the exchange of seeds, consuming everything without suspicion, piecing together a mirage.'[11] Yet the *Histories* also belongs to a different world to that of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is an *historia*, a word that until then had been used to describe an investigation of natural phenomena (a sense that was later to be preserved in the English phrase 'natural history'). In appropriating that word, Herodotus reveals both his indebtedness to the Presocratics and his intention to march further.

Herodotus examines the customs, beliefs and institutions not just of the Greeks but also of Persians, Egyptians, Libyans, Scythians and Arabs. Differences, he insists, are neither accidental nor the result of divine intervention but derive from material, earthly causes. The Egyptians have unusual customs because of their need to deal with their unusual climate. The natural poverty of Greece encouraged its inhabitants to develop appropriate laws and institutions to overcome it. The success of the Athenians was rooted not simply in the endeavours of great individuals but also in a democratic system that had nurtured a sense of common responsibility.

Herodotus attempted to use rational explanations to understand the social and cultural differences between cities and nations, peoples and ages; he also believed that such differences helped in turn to explain the movement of history. The Trojan War, the rise of Athenian democracy, the Persian invasion of Greece, the conflict between Athens and Sparta – none could be explained by appealing simply to individual decisions or whims, whether human or divine. Each was also the result of the way in which people in a given society with particular customs could be expected to act in certain circumstances.

The early Presocratics had tried to account for natural phenomena by borrowing concepts used to describe human interactions. Anaximander, for instance, suggested that all things came in opposites, such as hot and cold, wet and dry. These opposites were kept in balance because they were in a state of war and had to 'give justice and reparation to one another for their injustice in accordance with the ordinance of Time'.[12] Naturalists they may have been, but the only language the early Presocratics possessed through which to understand the workings of the cosmos was the language of human action and

agency. By seeing human history as the product not simply of individual agency but also of the environment, social, physical, cultural and historical, that the agents inhabited, Herodotus turned on its head this relationship between humans and nature. Human society was not a model for the understanding of nature. Nature provided a template for the understanding of human society. In this, the classicist David Sansone suggests, 'Herodotus invented not only history, but the social sciences as well.'[13] He also opened the way for a new way of understanding both human nature and human morality.

CHAPTER TWO

Gods of reason

1

He was poor, wrote nothing, claimed he knew nothing and acknowledged that he was ‘full of defects and always getting things wrong in some way or other’.[1] Yet he is, in the eyes of most philosophers, the founding father of Western philosophy. Its first saint. And its first martyr. In 399 BCE a jury of Athenian citizens found Socrates, then aged seventy, guilty of impiety and of corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens. It condemned him to death by hemlock.

Few philosophers were held in greater esteem in the ancient world than Socrates. He was, wrote Cicero, ‘the first who brought down philosophy from the heavens, placed it in cities, introduced it into families, and obliged it to examine life and morals, and good and evil’.[2] Why, then, did Athens put its most famous son to death? The trial of Socrates, and his execution, took place against the background of the Peloponnesian War. The twenty-seven-year conflict between Athens and Sparta had ended with Athenian defeat in 404 BCE, five years before the trial. Athens was reduced to a state of subjection, never regaining its pre-war influence or prosperity, while Sparta established itself as the leading power of Greece. Athenian democracy was overthrown and replaced by a Spartan-imposed oligarchy, a group of men who came to be known as the Thirty Tyrants.

‘Tyranny’ in ancient Greece meant not a cruel despotism but the concentration of political power in an individual other than a hereditary monarch. The Thirty were, however, tyrannical in a modern sense. They crushed the rights of Athenian citizens, restricting the

franchise to the wealthiest, purged many of the democratic leaders, executed hundreds and forced thousands more into exile. The Tyrants were overthrown after a year of bloody mayhem; democracy was finally restored in 401 BCE. Sparta had not relinquished its influence, though. In 403 an amnesty was declared for all supporters of the Thirty, ostensibly to unify the city. Embittered democrats were left without a target for vengeance.

Socrates had close links to the Thirty. Critias, the leader, and a particularly bloodthirsty man, was a former disciple, as was Charmides, one of his deputies. It is unclear the degree to which Socrates supported the Thirty, but he openly espoused anti-democratic views, often praising the laws of Sparta.

It was not just Socrates' politics, but his philosophy, too, that aroused suspicion. Many saw his teachings as undermining Athens by questioning traditional values. The 'Socratic method' sought to establish moral truth not directly by explaining what it was to be pious, courageous or virtuous but indirectly through questioning others' beliefs about piety, courage or virtue, and showing them to be confused, contradictory or false. The relentless questioning seemed to many not to unearth the truth but to turn the world upside down.

Socrates could not be indicted on political charges because of the amnesty. He was arraigned instead for religious and moral transgressions that were, to many Athenians, as disturbing as the political crimes and physical savagery of the Thirty. Socrates was accused of rejecting the city's recognized gods, of introducing new divinities and of corrupting the young men of Athens by 'making the inferior argument superior'. Certainly, these were trumped-up charges. But they also gave a sense of the anxieties many Athenians felt about the dislocation of their lives during the course of the fifth century.

2

Socrates wrote nothing. His very philosophical method precluded him from doing so. Philosophy, for him, was an active, collaborative process, not one that could be captured forever on a page. Truth emerged through discussion and debate, and could be kept alive only through dialogue. When others wanted to explain Socrates' thoughts they often did so in the form of a dialogue. Plato's in particular have come to be a monument to his philosophical master, though he so hero-worshipped his teacher that we need to treat with caution the saintly figure that emerges through his dialogues.

Philosophical thought in fifth-century Athens was dominated by the Sophists. Thanks largely to Plato's criticism, 'sophistry' has come to

mean that which is dishonest, deceptive or disingenuous. At that time, however, the word carried no negative connotations. A sophist was a teacher (the word comes from *sophia*, meaning wisdom).

The Sophists were the products of two key developments in fifth-century Athens, the one political, the other intellectual. The first was the rise of Athenian democracy, the second, the reverberations felt from the arguments of the Presocratics. Democracy had placed a premium on a new set of social skills, in particular the ability to speak, hold an argument and convince an audience. The Sophists sold themselves as the teachers of such talents. To their critics Sophists seemed less philosophers than flimflam artists, seeking not to uncover truth but to entangle, entrap and confuse their opponents, and to teach their students a stock of arguments to prove any position. The Sophists were not, however, mere rhetoricians. Many taught literature, politics, history, physics and mathematics. Some, such as Protagoras and Gorgias, were genuine philosophers. Their ideas were shaped not just by the needs of democracy but also by the paradoxes and dilemmas thrown up by the Presocratics. Some Sophists embraced the sceptical consequences of the arguments of thinkers such as the atomist Democritus, who insisted that humans could not rely on their 'bastard senses' to provide truths about the world, but could trust only to reason. Many, such as the Sceptics, became distrustful of reason, too, believing it impossible to resolve differences among contrary opinions and arguments. Others, such as Protagoras, challenged scepticism but in so doing seemed to undermine the very possibility of objective truth. For Democritus, if the same water appears cold to you and warm to me it was because our senses are unreliable. For Protagoras, it is because the water really is both cold and warm. Reality, and truth, are self-created and subjective, not independent and objective. In an age in which the alternatives seemed to be the scepticism unleashed by Democritus or the relativism of Protagoras' rebuttal of such scepticism, there was plenty of space for the idea that the ability to argue and persuade was more important than the content of one's argument.

Many saw Socrates' arguments in the same light. His method of relentlessly questioning his students or opponents until there appeared no substance left in their argument, and yet seemingly having no answer of his own as replacement, appeared to his critics to be pure 'sophistry'. Socrates was in fact unabashedly hostile to the Sophists. He was obsessed with the need for righteous living, and the Sophists had, he maintained, little understanding of righteousness. 'After all', Socrates says in Plato's *Cratylus*, 'if what each person believes is true for him, no one can truly be wiser than anyone else.'[3] Socrates was dismissive of the Sophists' relativism, while also having little time for the kind of speculation about the natural world in which the

Presocratics had indulged. The only important question, he insisted, was about how one ought to live, and in particular about how people could care for their souls by acquiring the virtues.

But what is a virtue? Traditionally there were five: courage, moderation, piety, wisdom and justice. In a world made uncertain by Democritus and Protagoras, the meaning of such qualities no longer appeared certain. Socrates' response to the moral cul-de-sac created by scepticism and relativism was to insist that morality had to be rethought from scratch. Moral inquiry, for Socrates, was philosophical, not rhetorical, because it was concerned with truth, not persuasion. It appealed to rational argument, not custom, tradition or authority. Neither was it naturalistic in a Presocratic way. Socratic moral thought relied on principles derived not from natural speculation but from a rational study of the human condition.

3

Socrates meets Euthyphro in the agora, the central marketplace of Athens, outside the offices of the magistrate who investigates charges of religious impropriety. Socrates has just been charged with impiety and corruption, charges that would lead eventually to his trial and execution. Euthyphro, a friend who believes himself to be a religious expert, is about to prosecute his father for the murder of one of his servants. The victim was himself a murderer, who had killed a fellow slave 'in drunken anger'. Euthyphro's father had tied him up, thrown him into a ditch and sent a messenger to ask a priest what he should do next. The messenger was delayed in returning, so much so that the neglected prisoner had in the meantime died.

Socrates is shocked by Euthyphro's action, which appears to disregard both convention and his obligations to kin. Euthyphro replies haughtily that he 'would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge of all such things'. 'It is indeed most important', Socrates responds, 'that I should become your pupil', for this is the very knowledge he needs to escape the charge of impiety brought against him. 'Tell me then', he demands of Euthyphro, 'what is the pious and what the impious?'[4]

So begins Plato's *Euthyphro*, one of his earliest Socratic dialogues, and one of the most significant in philosophical history. It lays bare the Socratic method, gets to the heart of Socrates' moral concerns and sets up one of the great dilemmas of moral thought.

Euthyphro's first answer to Socrates' question is to suggest that to be pious 'is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer'. But, Socrates protests, this is just an *example* of what it is to be pious.

He wants a universal definition – 'that form itself that makes all pious actions pious' – so that he can use it as a model to say 'that any action of yours or another's that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not'. This was an argument to which Socrates returned again and again in his moral dialogues: that to know what piety or justice or goodness meant was to know what each meant in every circumstance.

So Euthyphro proposes a definition: 'What is dear to the gods is pious, what is not is impious.' This cannot be, Socrates responds, because both men agree that 'the gods are in a state of discord' and that some gods see certain actions as pious while others look to different actions. Euthyphro modifies his definition, suggesting that 'the pious is what all the gods love, and the opposite, what all the gods hate, is the impious'.

Socrates now asks his most important question, one that two millennia later still causes consternation. 'Is the pious', he wonders, 'being loved by the gods because it is pious, or is it pious because it is being loved by the gods?' Unless the gods love something for no good reason, then they must love something as pious because it inherently possesses value. But if it inherently possesses value, then it does so independently of the gods. It cannot be pious, as Euthyphro supposes, simply because the gods love it.

The so-called 'Euthyphro dilemma' was to become of increasing importance in theology and philosophy, especially as the great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – developed over the next millennium. In these faiths, the plethora of gods of Greek and other pantheistic religions gave way to a single omnipotent Creator. This Creator was the source of goodness and value in the world. But, as the German philosopher Leibniz asked at the beginning of the eighteenth century, if it is the case that whatever God thinks, wants or does is good by definition, then 'what cause could one have to praise him for what he does if in doing something quite different he would have done equally well?'[5] If, on the other hand, God recognizes what is good and promotes it because of its inherent goodness, then goodness must exist independently of God. It might now make sense to revere God's goodness but God is no longer the source of that goodness, nor do we need to look to God to discover that which is good.

We will return to this dilemma later. Socrates did not possess the vocabulary to pursue this theological argument. Nevertheless, in making the distinction between the idea of goodness as something loved by the gods and that of gods as loving that which is good, Socrates hints at the idea that morality had to possess its own measure of value, not one that could be alienated to heaven.

Euthyphro cannot answer Socrates' question (indeed, he does not understand it) but suggests eventually that piety is a form of justice.

Socrates responds that ‘where there is piety there is also justice, but where there is justice there is not always piety’. What is it, he asks, that makes piety different from all those other actions that we call just? And so it goes on.

Eventually, the perplexed Euthyphro falls back on the argument that honour, reverence and sacrifice must ‘please’ the gods. But this, as Socrates points out, is to take the argument full circle, for they have already agreed that piety cannot be that which the gods love. ‘So we must investigate again from the beginning what piety is,’ Socrates insists. At which point Euthyphro makes his excuses. ‘Some other time, Socrates,’ he says, ‘for I am in a hurry now and it is time for me to go.’

Euthyphro takes us to the heart of the Socratic method. Socrates strikes an ironic pose: he claims to know nothing of piety and is eager to be a student of the knowledgeable Euthyphro. The student relentlessly questions the arguments of the supposed master, until every one of the master’s arguments is shown to be untenable. Socrates (and the reader) seemingly comes away empty handed. Euthyphro leaves without being able to establish the meaning of piety; and while Socrates has mown down all his definitions, he has not replaced them with one of his own. And yet, Socrates has established something important, not just about piety, or goodness, but about morality itself, by suggesting that goodness, and hence morality, should have an objective existence independent of either gods or humans. This raises, however, a host of new questions. What does it mean for morality to have an objective existence? If moral laws come neither from gods nor from humans, whence do they derive? Socrates never answered such questions. It is not clear that he even thought them important. Nevertheless, they became central issues for philosophers who followed, beginning with Socrates’ pupil Plato.

4

Plato’s birth is shrouded in mystery. He may have been born in Athens, and was probably born sometime between 429 and 423 BCE. What is certain is that he was born into royalty, both literally and metaphorically. Plato could trace his descent from Codrus, the last of the legendary kings of Athens, killed during the Dorian invasion in the eleventh century, and Melanthus, king of Messenia. His mother was a descendant of Solon, the sixth-century poet and statesman whose political and economic reforms laid the foundations for Athenian democracy. It was a family saturated with power, prestige and influence.

From such a background, Plato might have been expected to enter politics. He was, however, temperamentally unsuited to such a life, not to mention cynical about it. In 'all states now existing', he concluded, 'without exception their system of government is bad'.[6]

What troubled Plato was not simply politics in general, but the particular political form championed in Athens – democracy. The single event that more than any fired both Plato's cynicism of politics and his scepticism of democracy was the execution of his moral god Socrates.

Philosophy, not politics, was for Plato the guide to a better world. Around 387 BCE he founded his Academy. The Academy was actually a walled public park about a mile to the north of Athens, named after the mythical hero Academus who had supposedly created it. Inside was a sacred olive grove dedicated to Athena, goddess both of the city and of wisdom. Inside, too, was a small house and garden that Plato had inherited and in which he opened a school for philosophical debate and instruction that could train politicians in philosophy and philosophers in politics.

The key work in which the many threads of Plato's argument about the relationship between politics, philosophy and the conception of the good life come together is *The Republic*. Written in 360 BCE, at the heart of the masterpiece is the question 'What is justice?' The Greek word δικαιοσύνη – *dikaiosune* – which is usually translated as 'justice', had a wider meaning to Plato, more akin to the modern idea of morality itself.

The Republic, like most of Plato's works, is written in the form of a dialogue, with Socrates acting as Plato's mouthpiece. It opens with Socrates' companions Cephalus and Polemarchus attempting to define what they believe to be justice. The Sophist Thrasymachus enters the fray. 'Coiled like a wild animal about to spring,' Socrates recalls, 'he hurled himself at us as if to tear us to pieces.' Rejecting the very idea of morality, Thrasymachus insists that 'Justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger'. There were, Thrasymachus observes, many kinds of cities in Greece – democracies, oligarchies, military dictatorships, tyrannies. Each had a different conception of justice, but all benefited the ruling class. 'Democracy makes democratic laws, tyranny makes tyrannical laws', Thrasymachus argues, and all 'declare what they have made – what is to their advantage – to be just for their subjects, and they punish anyone who goes against this as lawless and unjust'. What is called justice is, for Thrasymachus, simply injustice writ large. Those who commit small crimes 'are called temple-robbers, kidnappers, housebreakers, robbers and thieves'. But if someone 'kidnaps and enslaves the citizens', then 'instead of these shameful names he is called happy and blessed'.[7]

Conventional morality, in other words, is a scam, a set of rules invented by the ruling class to promote its own interests and to keep everyone else in check. Reject the scam, is Thrasymachus' advice, pursue your interests rather than the interests of others, and disregard justice whenever you can get away with it.

In picking up Thrasymachus' challenge, Plato responds at two levels. First, he sets out plans for a social Utopia to show how naked self-interest is harmful to both the individual and the collective soul. Second, he gives a metaphysical account of what it is to be good, challenging the claim that justice is relative to particular cities. In so doing he not only takes on the Sophists but also attempts to get to grips with two questions raised by Socrates. How can one define terms such as piety or goodness rather than simply illustrate instances of such ideas? And how can we find objective moral truths?

5

All humans divide naturally, in Plato's eyes, into three classes, each suited for one of the three indispensable social roles. Labourers produce the material needs of society. Soldiers guard the state. And rulers rule.

The tripartite division of the population mirrors the tripartite division of the soul into appetitive, spirited and rational parts. The appetitive part of the soul is linked to bodily desires, such as the yearning for food or pleasure. The spirited is concerned with honour, and with anger and indignation. The rational is driven by a desire for knowledge and truth. This division, especially between the appetites, or bodily desires, and reason, or the mind, was to exert enormous pressure upon subsequent ethical thinking. For Plato, and for many of those who followed in his footsteps, reason and desire, the body and the mind, the ego and the id, were locked in mortal combat.

Humans, according to Plato, fall into one of three categories depending on which part of their soul is dominant, three categories that correspond, of course, to the three social roles necessary for the healthy functioning of the state. The common people are driven by base desires, soldiers by a yearning for honour, while rulers look to reason. Upbringing may help an individual regulate his soul and thereby change the group to which he should belong. Mostly, though, it is a matter of birth – we are born to be blacksmiths or soldiers or philosopher kings.

A healthy soul is one in which there is a balance between its three parts; a soul in which reason rules, spirit assists by providing the necessary emotional qualities of courage, self-control and strength of

will, and appetite is kept in check, inhibited from doing more than satisfying essential physical needs. As with the soul, so with the state. In a healthy state, the labourers, the soldiers and the rulers live in harmony; and they do so because such a state is ruled by those whose souls are most guided by reason. Justice is expressed in the maintenance of balance, in the soul, and in the city. A city is 'thought to be just when each of the natural classes within it did its own work'.[8]

Plato described five different types of societies, and ranked them according to how rational, successful and just each was. Four were kinds of city states that already existed in Greece – timocracy, oligarchy, democracy and tyranny. The fifth was his own Republic, a society ruled by philosopher kings, and which Plato called an aristocracy. This was the best of societies, one in which 'the desires of the inferior many are controlled by the wisdom and desires of the superior few'.[9]

Next on Plato's scale of the good society came timocracy, or military dictatorship. Sparta was the model (as indeed it was for the Republic itself). It was a bleak, austere society built upon military conquest and mass enslavement in which slavery allowed not for a life of luxury but for one of unremitting asceticism. Sparta demanded obedience and sacrifice from its citizens to sublimate their interests to those of the community. All manual work in Sparta was the lot of slaves and of helots – Greeks captured in battle and enchained as bonded labour – because all male Spartans were trained almost from birth to become professional soldiers. To us, Sparta may seem anything but an ideal society, but the discipline, selflessness and attachment to the ideals of the polis won Spartans the admiration not just of Plato but of most ancient Greeks.

Timocrats, Plato believed, are ruled by the desire for honour, a passion more worthy than that of bodily desire, but less so than that of reason. If neither aristocracy nor timocracy were possible, then Plato considered oligarchy as the next best society. The souls of oligarchs are dominated by an ignoble passion, the desire for material goods. They nevertheless have to show a degree of self-control to accumulate wealth. Then comes democracy, a society ruled by people dominated by lowly appetites for food, drink, sex and pleasure. It is a society without order or discipline. A democrat puts all 'his pleasures on an equal footing', 'always surrendering rule over himself to which ever desire comes along, as if it were chosen by lot'. Political equality inevitably leads to a coarseness of culture and an anything-goes morality, a claim that finds an echo among modern conservatives.

The only society worse than a democracy is a tyranny. This is not the opposite of democracy but is rather democracy fully played out, a society in which every form of behaviour, including murder and

disrespect for law, becomes acceptable. The moral of the story is that 'extreme freedom can't be expected to lead to anything but a change to extreme slavery, whether for a private individual or for a city'. Tyranny enslaves not just the population but the tyrant too. A tyrant's soul, Plato observes, must be 'full of slavery and unfreedom, with the most decent parts enslaved and with a small part, the maddest and the most vicious, as their master'. He is 'like the city he rules', full of 'fear, convulsions and pains throughout his life'.[10]

This is Plato's response to Thrasymachus. Pure self-interest cannot be in the interest of the self, because it makes one unhappy and enslaved. To live well is to have an ordered soul, one that is in harmony with itself. 'How can it profit anyone to acquire gold unjustly', he asks, 'if, by doing so, he enslaves the best part of himself to the worst?'[11]

6

Why should the rulers of Plato's Republic be so much better than other rulers at maintaining the balance of the soul and the harmony of the city? Because they are philosopher kings. Rulers are born to rule. But the 'superior few' in Plato's Utopia are especially wise and rational. They are not merely special by birth, but their specialness has been honed to a pitch by singular training.

From birth to cradle, members of the potential ruling class are subject to a regime that would make North Korea seem like a playboy's paradise and leave English public schoolboys yearning for the days of fagging and cold showers. But it is not one at which any Spartan would cavil, for it is from Spartan life itself that Plato draws inspiration. A special breeding programme ensures that 'the best men … have sex with the best women as frequently as possible', while the 'opposite' is the case with 'the most inferior men and women'. Newborn children are culled, with the finest taken to a 'rearing pen' while low-grade specimens are whisked off to 'a secret and unknown place' and killed. (In Sparta, according to Plutarch, 'puny and deformed' infants were thrown into a chasm on Mount Taygetos known as the *Apothetae*, Greek for 'deposits'; many classicists now think this is a myth.) The lucky survivors 'are to be possessed in common', as are women. The children are put through a strict programme of education, indoctrination and discipline. They are forbidden from eating fish or confectionery. Homer is banned, as are all dramatists, not to mention music from Lydia, which, apparently, is too sorrowful.

The reward for such a regimen of breeding, indoctrination and

discipline is the creation of a class of citizens, not just upstanding and virtuous, but one whose souls are so well ordered, and so able to sublimate their animal desires to the dictates of reason, that they can see beyond this world and into a realm of transcendence. And so Plato introduces us to his theory of the Forms.

Ordinary people, Plato believed, 'are living in a dream'. What they take to be real objects or feelings or qualities are mere shadows, fleeting phantoms of authentic existence. Shadows of what? Of the Forms, the true reality, that exist in a transcendent realm separate from the physical world and independent of our senses. Sensible things – things that we understand through our senses – come to be, change and perish. They are in constant flux. That is why our senses deceive us. True reality is not the physical world revealed to our senses but the ideal world accessible only by reason.

A non-philosopher, Plato believed, 'likes beautiful sounds, colours, shapes and everything fashioned out of them'. But he is 'unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself'. A philosopher, on the other hand, is enamoured not just of beautiful things, or of truthful things, but of Beauty and Truth themselves. When Socrates searched for definitions, he was, Plato suggests, looking for the Form of that which he was trying to define. The Form provides the objective definition of terms such as justice or piety. The highest of the Forms is that of goodness. To most Greek philosophers, to be 'good' was to fulfil one's proper role in the order of things. The Form of the Good established the purpose and goal of all things in the cosmos. Apart from the gods, only a philosopher could comprehend the Form of the Good.

To illustrate the contrast between the opinion of ordinary people and the knowledge of true philosophers, Plato gives us the famous allegory of the Prisoners in the Cave. Most humans are like prisoners chained in a deep subterranean cave, manacled in a line and able only to look at the rock face in front. 'Far above and behind them' is a fire, the only source of light in the cave. Between the fire and the prisoners, people are moving, carrying various objects that cast flickering shadows on the rock face. The prisoners have only ever seen these shadows. They have never cast eyes on the real objects creating them. They have no idea that such objects exist. The prisoners, Plato observes, 'would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of those artefacts'.[12] And that is how humans exist too. The unseen real things correspond to the Forms, the sensuous objects and qualities we take to be real are the shadows on the wall.

Now, suppose one of these prisoners had been freed from his chains and taken outside. He would be 'pained and dazzled' by the light and 'unable to see the things whose shadows he had seen before'. But once his eyes had adjusted, he could view things afresh and he

would discover a new world. If now he returned to the cave, he would find it difficult to see the shadows. He would 'invite ridicule' from the other prisoners who would say of him that 'he'd returned from his upward journey with his eyesight ruined and it isn't worthwhile even to try to travel upwards'. If he tried to free the prisoners and lead them up to the real world, 'if they could somehow get their hands on him, wouldn't they kill him?'[13]

This was not, for Plato, a rhetorical question. Socrates, after all, had been put to death by the democratic cave-dwellers of Athens. Only in Plato's Republic would Socrates have been given his true due, for only there would society have been ruled by those who knew the Forms.

7

In *The Republic*, Plato links a political argument about the best form of society to an ethical argument about what constitutes the good and how to discover it, and binds the two together with a psychological claim about how best to achieve happiness. Goodness and happiness are, for Plato, the offspring of harmony, both of the soul and of the city.

The psychological, the political and the metaphysical arguments have all proved influential, from Christian theology's appropriation of the transcendental Forms to Sigmund Freud's tripartite distinction between the ego, id and superego. There is, however, to the modern mind at least, something dissatisfying about Plato's theory. It is not so much an ethical as a psychological refutation of Thrasymachus. Plato dismisses naked self-interest not as ethically unsound but as mentally unhealthy. To be unjust is to suffer from an unbalanced mind.

In large part Plato's failure to make a properly ethical case against the pure pursuit of self-interest rests on his inability to recognize the force of Thrasymachus' moral argument. The idea of self-interest is, perhaps surprisingly, not self-evident. At different times, in different societies, 'self-interest' has possessed different meanings. Compare, for instance, Thrasymachus and Achilles. Achilles was obsessed by his personal desires. He did not wish to lose his war prize Briseis. He was more consumed by preserving his honour than by defending the interests of the Greeks. That, at least, is how a modern reader would view it. For Achilles, though, his withdrawal of his men from battle in outrage at Agamemnon's action was not a case of selfishness, nor even of self-interest, but a matter of following the code laid down by his community. That code was often not in the interests of the individual. The highest honour, after all, was death in battle, a fate that was to befall Achilles himself. But, in prizing individual honour above wider

needs, nor was it often in the interests of the community either. This was one reason that such honour codes slowly evolved into other forms of moral life.

Thrasymachus possessed a different concept of self-interest. Self-interest to him was unrelated to the interests of the community; individuals should not take into account needs other than their own. Philosophers, ancient and modern, have shown why such an egoistical view makes little sense. Humans are not solitary creatures but exist only within a community. It is only through a community of others that an individual can assert his or her own interests. Nevertheless, in time, Thrasymachus' claim that justice is a scam, that it is merely an expression of power, and that the most rational behaviour is to disregard justice where possible and pursue one's self-interest was to prove almost as influential as Plato's own arguments. Hobbes, Nietzsche, Marx: all in their own ways were to echo Thrasymachus. They are three disparate thinkers. What connects them is that they are philosophers of the modern era, attempting to make sense of the meaning of political power, individual agency and social need at a time when traditional moral concepts were in disarray. To be able to draw on the idea of 'self-interest' at the heart of Thrasymachus' argument, they also had to draw upon a notion of the 'self' that neither Homer nor Plato possessed. It was not that Hobbes, Nietzsche or Marx would necessarily have agreed with Thrasymachus. It is more that the social and intellectual changes that marked the coming of modernity made an argument rooted in individual self-interest that much more plausible. Even those who disagreed with such ethical claims had nevertheless to take them more seriously.

In Plato's world, notions of the inner self were barely articulated, an individual's identity and interest were bound up entirely with the community in which he lived, the very notion of the individual was far more constrained than it is today, and ethics was a means of regulating the social roles and relationships within a community. The importance of the community was expressed in the almost spiritual quality that the polis possessed in ancient Greek life. It was through the polis that the individual citizen discovered his identity and through which he became part of a history and a heritage. Even today there is a fraught debate about how to balance individual rights and social needs. Two millennia ago the idea of naked egoism as expressed by Thrasymachus may, indeed, have seemed a form of mental illness.

CHAPTER THREE

On human flourishing

1

In *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco's beguiling philosophical whodunnit, the Franciscan friar William of Baskerville and his novice, Adso of Melk, investigate a series of murders at a Benedictine monastery in northern Italy to which they have travelled to participate in a theological debate. William's investigation leads him to uncover a plot to keep hidden a single book in the abbey's library, the greatest in Christendom. In the novel's denouement, amidst the ruins of a burning library, William asks the blind librarian, Jorge of Burgos, why he has devoted his life to protecting the world from any knowledge of this single work. 'Because it was by the Philosopher,' replies Jorge. 'Every book by that man has destroyed a part of the learning that Christianity had accumulated over the centuries.'

The Philosopher was Aristotle, the man whose work until modern times shaped the way that most European thinkers – and many non-European ones too – viewed the physical world and understood the nature of the divine. Despite the Book of Genesis revealing 'what has to be known about the composition of the cosmos', Jorge bemoans, 'it sufficed to rediscover the *Physics* of the Philosopher to have the universe reconceived in terms of dull and slimy matter'.

Aristotle was born in 384 BCE in Stagira in northern Greece. His father was court physician to the king of Macedonia. At seventeen Aristotle went to Athens to attend Plato's Academy, which became his home for the next twenty years. He was the Academy's star pupil, but also fiercely independent. That may be why, when Plato died in 347

BCE, Plato's nephew Speusippus was chosen to head the Academy. Aristotle went back to Macedonia, becoming court tutor to the young Alexander, later to be Great.

Twelve years later, Aristotle returned to Athens where he set up his own Academy, the Lyceum. By this time most of the Greek city states had come under Macedonian rule, generating much resentment. When Alexander died in 323 BCE, there was an anti-Macedonian revolt in Athens. Aristotle was indicted on fabricated charges of impiety. Not wishing to suffer the same fate as Socrates, he went into exile, where he died the following year.

Aristotle wrote all his major works in the twelve years after his return to Athens. All have been lost. Nothing remains but his notes. But what notes! There are almost two million words whose range is phenomenal. Aristotle made major advances in logic, mathematics, biology, physiology, astronomy, philosophy, literature and rhetoric. He was, as Dante put it in *The Inferno*, 'the master of those who know'.

Aristotle was a different kind of philosopher to those that had gone before. One of Raphael's most famous paintings, *Scuola di Atene* or *The School of Athens*, is a fresco on the walls of the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, depicting most of the great Greek philosophers. At the centre stand Plato and Aristotle, holding copies of their books in one hand, and pointing with the other, Plato upwards to the heavens, Aristotle down to the Earth. The two gestures express their two philosophies. There was in Aristotle none of the poetical, speculative or mystical. He was, rather, methodical, balanced, even plodding and staid, one who thought, and wrote, like a professor not a prophet. His attention to detail, close observation and slow, reasoned argument were perfectly suited to the study of the physical world. But applied to ethics, Aristotle's method often lends his arguments a 'bleeding obvious' quality that can make them appear both profoundly sensible and insufferably trite.

'Every art and every investigation, and similarly every action and pursuit, is considered to aim at some good. Hence the good has been rightly defined as "that at which all things aim"'.[1] So begins *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's key moral work. Like all his surviving texts, it was a collection of notes to aid him with his lectures at the Lyceum. It was dedicated to his son Nicomachus, who probably edited it too – hence the modern title. Its starting point, the claim that the good is that which we desire, was a typical Aristotelian formulation, both profound and trite.

There are, Aristotle observed, many things we desire, and different people desire different things. There exist, therefore, many goods. However, if 'our activities have some end which we want for its own sake, and for the sake of which we want all the other ends', then 'this

must be … the supreme good'. The knowledge of this supreme good 'is of great importance to us in the conduct of our lives'.[2]

This supreme good is εὐδαιμονία – *eudaimonia*. It is a concept that in Greek moral thought goes back at least as far as Socrates, but which is most associated with Aristotle. The word is usually translated as 'happiness'. To the Greeks *eudaimonia* meant much more. It was not a matter of the satisfaction of immediate desires, nor even of a sense of wellbeing, but described more broadly a state of human flourishing, or a state of being that is worth seeking, that which Aristotle calls 'living well and doing well'.[3] It is at one and the same time an objective measure of human wellbeing and a value-laden concept of flourishing.

Eudaimonia, Aristotle argues, cannot simply be pleasure, as some Sophists believed. One who possesses *eudaimonia* will necessarily find pleasure in his way of life. But finding pleasure is not the same as possessing *eudaimonia*. A torturer might take pleasure in his perverse and corrupt activities. But we would not say of him that he lived a flourishing life.

Cultured people often associate *eudaimonia* with honour, while a businessman might prize wealth. Honour and wealth are, however, means to an end, not ends in themselves. Not even virtue is the same as *eudaimonia*. The state of happiness was not for Aristotle a passive state but one achieved through practical activity. 'The possession of goodness', on the other hand, Aristotle points out, may be compatible 'with leading a life of inactivity'. It may also be compatible 'with the most atrocious suffering or misfortune'.[4] Socrates suggests in *Gorgias* that 'doing what's unjust [is] worse than suffering it, and not paying what is due worse than paying it'. A man committing evil can never be as happy as a man suffering evil, while a man who has acted unjustly but has been punished for it is happier than a man who has got away with acting unjustly, even if such punishment involves being 'put on the rack, castrated' and having one's 'eyes put out'.[5] At which point Polus, one of Socrates' interlocutors and a student of Gorgias, simply laughs. Aristotle is unlikely to have laughed at Socrates, but he certainly dismissed the idea that a virtuous person living a life of abject poverty or being torn to pieces on a rack could be considered happy in any sense of the word. Virtue for him was a means to an end, not an end in itself.

Goodness could not be defined in transcendental terms, either, as Plato had attempted. The good, Aristotle observes, exists in many forms; so 'there cannot be a single universal common to all cases'.[6] Knowledge of the Forms was knowledge of something unchanging and eternal. Ethical knowledge, on the other hand, was the kind of knowledge necessary to guide our actions. It would therefore have to

be knowledge of things that changed. Knowledge of the Forms would be knowledge of universals, whereas ethics required knowledge that took into account the specific context of any action. The good, Aristotle insists, must be a description of something that exists, and is desired for, in this world, not in a transcendental realm.

2

Aristotle had established that which *eudaimonia* could not be. To understand what it *was*, he suggests, we have to appreciate the function of a human being, to comprehend what it is that makes humans distinctive.

The concept of an object's function was central to Aristotle's philosophy. Every object, he believed, had a natural place it inhabited and an essence that made it behave in its customary fashion. Each had a purpose; every change in the natural world was the result of objects attempting to fulfil their purpose or to return to their natural place in the order of things. Why does an acorn become an oak? Because that is its purpose. The acorn is potentially, but not actually, an oak. In becoming an oak it becomes what it already was potentially, fulfilling its purpose and confirming its nature.

An object could only be understood in relation to its purpose or function. This was as true for humans as for every other species. There are many characteristic features of human life – humans breathe, sleep, act, think. Most of these characteristics are shared with other creatures. What truly distinguishes humans, Aristotle argues, is the possession of reason. Hence the exercise of reason is the proper function of a human being. Happiness consists in acting in accordance with reason. Or, to be more precise, it means acting virtuously in accordance with reason.

There were, for Aristotle, two kinds of virtues: moral and intellectual. Moral virtues are character traits, of which Aristotle mentions twelve: courage, temperance, generosity, magnificence, magnanimity, pride, patience, honesty, wittiness, friendliness, modesty and righteous indignation. Intellectual virtues consist of abilities such as intelligence or foresight that help formulate plans and calculate consequences.

The two kinds of virtues are related to two distinct parts of the soul, the rational and irrational. Intellectual virtues, rooted in the rational soul, are embodiments of reason. The moral virtues are housed in the irrational part of the soul; they are, nevertheless, able to 'listen' to reason and in so doing to incline one to act in certain ways. Those who do not act in a virtuous fashion often fail to do so because they find it difficult to make their desires 'obedient' to reason.

Aristotle's division of the soul is clearly indebted to Plato. But where Plato looked to reason to repress physical desires, for Aristotle the role of reason was to guide desire, and allow it to express itself to the right degree. Feelings themselves could be an embodiment of reason, but only if both reason and feelings were properly cultivated.

Not all humans can control their feelings because not all humans possess intellectual virtue. Women have less control than men. Slaves cannot rein in their desires at all, which is why they have to be controlled by their masters. Yet, while Aristotle saw women and slaves as naturally incapable of being as virtuous as freeborn men, he did not view virtues as naturally given. Intellectual and moral virtues have to be nurtured, each in their own way. Intellectual virtues can be taught, though not necessarily in the classroom. There are, in fact, two kinds of intellectual virtues. *Theoria* is the ability to think about the nature of the world; it is akin to science and is used to contemplate universal laws. *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, helps us 'contemplate things that are variable'. It is the knowledge of how to act in particular situations. It cannot be learnt like biology or physics or even philosophy but understood only through concrete experiences.

Moral virtues cannot be taught at all, at least formally. They are dispositions to behave in certain ways that are acquired in childhood almost unconsciously through good upbringing and reinforced through repeated use. One becomes honest by being brought up to be honest. Every time one is faced with a situation in which one could be dishonest, but chooses not to, the stronger becomes one's disposition to be honest. To be virtuous is to possess the disposition to act virtuously, and the practical wisdom to know how and when to do so.

The Greek word for virtue is ἀρετή or *arete*. An arête is also, for mountaineers, a sharp ridge, with steep cliffs falling away on either side. It is a good metaphor for Aristotle's vision of *arete* as moral virtue. An Aristotelian virtue is like a narrow path with a chasm of vice to right and left. Courage is the virtuous path between rashness and cowardice, righteous indignation the path between envy and spitefulness. To act virtuously in accordance with reason is for Aristotle to observe a balance between excess and deficiency in all things, to thread a path along the arête between the vices on either side. This takes us to the famous 'doctrine of the mean'. 'It is in the nature of moral qualities', Aristotle wrote, 'that they are destroyed by deficiency and excess'. Take courage. 'The man who shuns and fears everything and stands up to nothing becomes a coward,' Aristotle observes; 'the man who is afraid of nothing at all, but marches up to every danger, becomes foolhardy.' Similarly with temperance: 'The man who indulges in every pleasure and refrains from none becomes licentious; but if a man behaves like a boor and turns his back on every pleasure, he is a case of insensibility.'[7] It is *phronesis*, the wisdom

acquired through thinking about one's experiences, that enables the virtuous man to find the mean and keep on the mountain ridge.

Aristotle's ethics, Bertrand Russell famously suggested, may be 'useful to comfortable men of weak passions; but he has nothing to say to those who are possessed by a god or a devil'. To anyone 'with any depth of feeling it is likely to be repulsive'.[8] There is an element of truth in this. Don't be too angry, nor too emollient either. Walk a line between prodigality and meanness. Neither obsequious nor cantankerous be. Aristotle's moral voice can often seem like that of the school matron at assembly. But Russell's is also a misreading of Aristotle. For his is not simply a counsel of moderation. Discovering the mean, in Aristotle's ethics, is not necessarily the same as choosing a midpoint. Aristotle makes a distinction between what he calls the 'mean in relation to the thing' and the 'mean in relation to us'. The former is that which is 'equidistant from the extremes, which is one and the same for everybody'. The latter is 'that which is neither excessive nor deficient, and this is *not* one and the same for all'.[9]

Finding the 'mean in relation to the thing' is about locating the absolute centre between deficiency and excess, the spot where you will find the school matron and Russell's 'comfortable man of weak passions'. Observing the 'mean in relation to us', on the other hand, means not necessarily being moderate but doing the right thing at the right time. It may sometimes be rational to be furiously angry, or to show a degree of courage that at other times may seem rash. Such anger or courage is not moderate but, insofar as it is rational, constitutes in Aristotle's eyes the mean. The trouble is, this is a classic 'bleeding obvious' argument. The idea of the 'mean in relation to us' may not be the tepid counsel of moderation that Russell feared. But to suggest that 'one should do the right thing' to 'the right person to the right extent at the right time for the right reason in the right way'[10] is to replace the tepid with the vacuous. No one could disagree with the advice, but one would hardly need to be Aristotle to give it.

3

A virtuous man had, in Aristotle's eyes, obviously to possess a virtuous character and be able to apply practical wisdom to moral questions. But, like Plato and many before him all the way back to Homer, Aristotle believed that he had to possess something more too: wealth, power and leisure. Wealth was not an end in itself. Nor was it virtuous to be greedy. Nevertheless, 'a poor man cannot be magnificent because he has not the means to meet heavy expenses

suitably'. Workers, traders and husbandmen should not be citizens because a working life 'is not noble, and it militates against virtue'.[11]

For Aristotle, as for Plato, ethics was subordinate to politics. The primary good was the good of the community rather than the good of the individual. Moral rules grew out of the structure of the community, and ensured the maintenance of that structure. A polis was, for Aristotle, a natural phenomenon. Just as it was in the nature of humans to be happy, so it was in the nature of humans to come together in groups capable of supporting and sustaining happiness. No citizen, he argues, 'should think that he belongs just to himself'. Rather, 'he must regard all citizens as belonging to the state, for each is a part of the state; and the responsibility for each part naturally has regard to the responsibility for the whole'. Hence, 'while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer and more sublime'.[12] There is more than an echo here of Plato's argument in *The Republic*.

The polis was necessary not simply for survival, but also for flourishing, for *eudaimonia*. This was particularly so, Aristotle suggested, because the masses 'living under the sway of their feelings … pursue their own pleasures and the means of obtaining them, and shun the pains that are their opposite'. Unlike the prosperous and well-heeled readers of Aristotle, the uneducated masses do not respond to rational 'argument and fine ideals' or even to 'shame' or 'disgrace' but primarily to 'fear' and to 'compulsion and punishment'. What every polis required, therefore, was 'a proper system of public supervision' to ensure that those who could not be virtuous nevertheless behaved in an appropriate manner.[13]

For Aristotle, the law is not simply a means by which the state regulates relations with citizens and between citizens. It is a much more creative, formative agent, through the use of which a community can instruct its members in their moral and social duties and help craft the ideal citizen. 'The student of ethics', Aristotle writes on the very last page of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 'must therefore apply himself to politics'. That is just what Aristotle does in *The Politics*, the work that in a sense completes the investigation begun in the *Ethics* by revealing the laws, regulations and institutions that best allow human flourishing. It is 'legislators [who] make citizens good by habituation'.[14]

The most important task for the politician is to frame the appropriate constitution for the polis – the laws, customs, institutions and system of moral education for the citizen. Aristotle distinguishes between just constitutions that aim 'at the common good' and are 'in accord with absolute justice', and unjust constitutions that 'aim only at the good of the rulers'. There are three right types of just constitutions:

monarchy, aristocracy ('so called because the *best* men rule') and polity, in which 'political control is exercised by the mass of the populace in the common interest'. Each just constitution has a corresponding 'deviation': tyranny, oligarchy and democracy. 'Tyranny', Aristotle writes, 'is monarchy for the benefit of the monarch, oligarchy for the benefit of the men of means, democracy for the benefit of the men without means'.[15]

A constitution is just if it distributes political power in proportion to individuals' merit or desert. Democrats believe that free birth constitutes merit, oligarchs that wealth or good family does. Both are wrong. Since the ultimate end of the polis is neither as a business to maximize wealth nor as a union to assure equality, but rather as a community to promote the good life, the correct conception of justice is the aristocratic belief that the true criterion for the distribution of power is 'excellence'.

The best society is one ruled by an absolute monarch who is also absolutely virtuous. Aristotle is pragmatic enough to recognize that such individuals are as rare as good-mannered gods, and that most societies, like most humans, are more corrupt, more tainted, more mixed. Of existing constitutions, the best is a mixture of oligarchy and democracy. In such societies, the poor and the rich balance out each other's immoral tendencies. Aristotle applies the principle of the mean, not simply to character, but to the constitution too. The best society is one with a large 'middle class' – those who are neither too rich nor too poor, but 'have a middling, adequate amount of property', those who are a bit like an Athenian philosopher.[16]

4

'Excessive striving for unification is a bad thing in a state'.[17] So wrote Aristotle about Plato's Utopia. Plato, he argued, overvalued political unity in *The Republic*, failed to recognize that his system of shared ownership was antagonistic to human nature and neglected the happiness of individual citizens.

Yet, the themes that unite Aristotle and Plato are at least as significant as the differences. Like Plato, Aristotle saw ethics and politics as inextricable. Like Plato, Aristotle saw the needs of the individual as subordinate to those of the collective. Like Plato, Aristotle believed that laws were necessary to make us good. Like Plato, Aristotle lauded aristocratic society as the rule of the best. Most strikingly, perhaps, Plato and Aristotle agreed on the polis that best embodied their ideals. Plato modelled his Republic on Sparta. For all

his criticisms of *The Republic*, Aristotle, too, saw the Spartan constitution as the best existing example of the 'well-mixed democracy and oligarchy'. Athens was for Aristotle, as it was for Plato, the worst form of democracy, because it allowed the basest feelings of the masses to become manifest.

Today we see Sparta as a repulsive society, a military dictatorship on a permanent war footing, the majority of whose population was enchained, 'a model, in miniature', in Bertrand Russell's view, 'of the State the Nazis would establish if victorious'.[18] To ancient Greeks it appeared differently. Plutarch tells the story of an old man coming late to an Olympiad and looking in vain for a seat. Most of the crowd mocks him for his age and infirmity. Then he enters the section where the Spartans are seated. Every man among them rises to his feet and offers him his seat. Somewhat abashed, but nevertheless admiringly, the other Greeks applaud the Spartans. 'Ah,' the old man observes with a sigh, 'all Greeks know what is right, but only the Spartans do it.' Even Greeks who were critical of the Spartan constitution admired their attachment to traditional ideals.

It is in Athens that we see the spirit of ancient Greece, and in whose magnificence we recognize how much we owe the Ancients. But it is in Sparta that we find its ethical heart, and in whose virtues we understand how different is the modern world. Or, to put it less crudely, in the modern world we have come to see Athens alone as evocative of the spirit of ancient Greece, and to dismiss Sparta as an aberration, whereas ancient Greeks looked upon both cities as giving concrete expression to their values, traditions and accomplishments, though in different ways. The Spartan constitution seemed to express best the almost sacred commitment of ancient societies to the sanctity of the community as the source of value, the insistence on social harmony, the attachment to tradition, and the subordination of the needs of the individual to that of the state. That is why philosophers forged in the furnace of Athens, the crucible of ideas and free thought in ancient Greece, should seek to idealize Sparta, a city that despised the freedoms granted by Athens.

In the journey from Homer to Aristotle, the Greeks crafted what we now call 'virtue theory', establishing the importance of character, community, flourishing and practical wisdom as the central themes of a virtuous life. This became the dominant ethical view over the next two millennia. Not till the eighteenth century did competing ethical frameworks develop in Kantianism and utilitarianism, the first stressing the importance of duty and conscience, the second the significance of the consequences of one's actions. On that journey from Homer to Aristotle were developed the ideas of virtue as a disposition to act according to reason; of practical wisdom as a skill that inclines one to do the right thing at the right time and to the right

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