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Arete & Achilles: Homer as the Foundation of Ancient Greek Education

Education has existed as long as, and cannot extricate itself from, civilization. Indeed, education is both the product and the conveyer of civilization. It both reflects and shapes the values of a people. **The ancient Greeks knew well the value in passing down the virtues, myths, and knowledge of their forefathers; with education the Greeks hoped to inculcate virtue into their youth. Education, though, while it might attempt to pass down knowledge, may be itself difficult to define. Nevertheless, throughout the history of ancient Greece Homer managed to remain the basic text of education, "the focus of all its studies" (Marrou 9). Though Greek culture grew to become more cosmopolitan, forgetting the point of Homer's education, and even when education lost any sort of permanent virtuous goal at all with the rise of sophism, Homer remained ever-present.** *Indeed, the Greeks respected Homer so greatly that they constantly refer to him in their works. From first recording the characters of the gods (Herodotus 17) to basic knowledge of geography (Marrou 9), so much of Greek knowledge came from Homer that it would have been nigh impossible to write a treatise without calling upon him.*

The Homeric, aristocratic form of education kept in mind the singular end of creating the Homeric knight (Marrou 10). Homer represented this warrior in his most perfect form as the hero Achilles. So much did Achilles represent the ideal man that even after death he lorded over the dead in his glory (Homer 265). The Greeks set up an education based around the recitation

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of Homeric poetry and physical training to aid in their quest to better imitate Achilles. This education remained the basis of Greek education for hundreds of years, and not until the rise of democracy did a rival educational form pervert it. **Throughout the history of ancient Greece, Homer provided the basis of education with the virtues he taught and the education one underwent to obtain them.**

For a warrior culture such as that of the early Greeks, education needed to inculcate within its pupils an ethical code that could perpetuate their system. Hearing the Iliad and the Odyssey recited gave the inhabitants a model of heroic action. These legends, say Alasdair MacIntyre

> **. . .provided a moral background to contemporary debate in classical societies, an account of a now-transcended or partly-transcended moral order whose beliefs and concepts were still partially influential, but which also provided an illuminating contrast to the present. The understanding of heroic society – whether it ever existed or not – is thus a necessary part of the understanding of classical society and of its successors (MacIntyre 121).**

This heroic education sought to motivate its students to excel in their station, thereby granting them the virtue that served as the basis for Homeric education, aretê. **Aretê is strictly defined as "virtue," though a more precise and accurate definition might be "excellence."** *In this way one can express "aretê" in a variety of ways; one might be, for example, an excellent runner, an excellent swimmer, or an excellent hostess. An idea that did not preclude itself to pugnacious acts, aretê could describe just about anything, as long as that action was done well.* **Just listening to Homer's poetry, though, did not fill the pupil with a sense of virtuous**

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excellence, someone had to lead him there. *In this way Homer gave not only the curriculum of this early education, but provided the teacher-student model as well.*

In the so-called "Dark Ages" of Greece there existed no educational institutions save for the family and a sort of primitive version of the master-apprentice relationship that the Medieval Ages would so popularize. Homer's *Odyssey* told the story of Odysseus' son, Telemachus, and what some might call his education. Werner Jaeger believes "It is impossible to read the *Odyssey* without feeling its deliberately educational outlook as a whole, although many parts of the poem show no trace of it" (Homer 29). Homer devoted the first four books entirely to Telemachus' adventures from court to court to find news of his father, an endeavor indicative of his newly found manhood. Along the entire way Athena, in the guise of Mentor, staid at his side and gave him advice and words. These episodes with Telemachus did not stand alone in providing an example of a mentor style of education. Elsewhere in Homer, the hero Achilles struggles with his teacher, Phoenix (Homer 485-495).

At first glance what one might call Homer's educational theory appears rather primitive – a means of creating good members of society – however, making one a "speaker of words and a doer of deeds" had far more purpose than the purely utilitarian (Davidson 15). Rather on the contrary, Homer's poetry called its listeners to perform noble deeds, to act in the very best manner possible. The aim of this education was "to lift the human being out of his "original nature" into his "ideal nature," which consists of intelligence, affection, and will, harmoniously working together for their own perfection" (Davidson 29). While the Homeric idea of aretê brought an individual closer to his fulfillment within his social role (MacIntyre 184), that did not mean virtue existed for an entirely utilitarian purpose. One's level of virtuosity existed on a

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sliding scale of aretê, and the closer to excelling in one's social position one came, the more virtuous one was.

Homer's Achilles represented the height of aretê in all of its agonistic glory, he strove to and proved himself to be the first in his class as a hero. H. I. Marrou beautifully expounds on the ideal of the hero, telling his readers the hero's one concern

> . . .is his own honor. In my view this is not, however, any romantic individualism, however personal it may seem. This love of self – φιλαντια – which Aristotle was to analyse, is not the love of the ego but of the *Self*, the Absolute Beauty, the Perfect Valour, that the hero longs to express in one Great Deed that will utterly astonish the great envious company of his equals. (Marrou 12)

Achilles, upon hearing of the death of his close friend Patroclus, flew into a rage and resolved to finally meet his fate in battle. To him, the action would be his great glory, and even though he knew in pursuing this glory he would die, he recognized death as a small cost in winning the greatest aretê possible (Homer 471).

When Homer told the story of Agamemnon and Achilles, particularly how Agamemnon takes Achilles rightful prize, he told the story of an abuse of the same sort of personal honor that irrevocably sets Achilles on his path to glory and destruction. Agamemon's unjust seizure of Achilles' prize, Briseis, so offended Achilles that he refused to fight until he saw the above opportunity to regain his honor, to prove his virtue. Achilles asked the king of the Greeks,

> Just how, Agamemnon,
> great field Marshal. . . most grasping man alive,
> how can the generous Argives give you prizes now?
> I know of no troves of treasure, piled, lying idle, anywhere.

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Whatever we dragged from the towns we plundered,
all's been portioned out. But collect it, call it back
from the rank and file? *That* would be the disgrace. (Homer 81)

Agamemnon had deprived Achilles of his rightful prize, one well won by a show of Achilles' impeccable aretê on the battlefield. In an attempt to solve the conflict Agamemnon calls upon his authority as leader of the expedition and king of the Greeks to justify his claim. Obviously, though, this did not work, Achilles refuses to fight because of this abuse of authority. These Greeks lived in an aristocratic world, and no single man could hold them together; virtue and honor belonged to the individual man and not to the state, as Agamemnon would have had it. This conflict exemplified the other great Homeric virtue, dikaiosunê, or justice. This justice did transcended social order, it did not center around the king (MacIntyre 134). Zeus himself, supposed king of the gods, could not even keep order in his heavenly kingdom.

Homer created more than one sort of model for his heroes, and although all of them excelled in what they did, not all of them characterized the ideal Homeric knight in the same sense that Achilles did. Odysseus, while praised at various times for his skill with words, represented the cunning type of person. This character differs from the perfect Homeric knight in all his martial glory through his ability to act well given any situation. Here the "good manners *savoir-faire-* of the Homeric hero meet the practical wisdom of the oriental scribe" (Marrou 10). The cunning tricks of Odysseus managed to get him out of numerous troubles on his way back to Ithaca, most famously his encounter with the Cyclops. Plutarch's life of Cimon shed further light upon this other sort of Homeric hero. Cimon, a man the Athenians prized for his ability in battle, "never acquired a literary education or any other of the liberal accomplishments which a Greek normally possessed, and that he was without a spark of true

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Attic cleverness and eloquence” (Plutarch 144). His nature, wrote Plutarch, “was unadorned, Forthright and at its best in times of crisis” (Plutarch 145). This clever sort of character stood for the uneducated but naturally intelligent man. Because such a man did not receive an education, they never learned what it meant to be honorable, or what it meant to achieve true aretê. In the same chapter in which Plutarch addressed Cimon’s education (or lack thereof) he wrote of his immorality, in particular his drunkenness and incestuous relations with his sister.

The clever hero best illustrated the effects of not having received an education. Cimon, before the Battle of Salamis, “carried in his hands a horse’s bridle to offer up to the goddess, in token of the fact that what the city needed at that moment was not knightly valour, but men to fight at sea” (Homer 146). The best interpretation of these heroes, as foils to the perfect Homeric knight, created more depth to the meaning of Homeric education. The Homeric model allowed for intelligence outside of education, and even some sort of virtue, but, if one were to reach the heights of Achilles, one needed either mortal, or, more often, **immortal assistance**.

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Homeric virtue cannot have existed without the **direction of the gods**. To Homer and the disciples of his educational tradition heaven destined some for an education and prosperity in aretê, and others for less glorious roles. Theognis wrote on the subject, saying “It is easier to beget and raise a person than it is to implant good sense in him. No one yet has devised a way to make the fool wise or to make him noble if his is bad” (Joval 6). Homer provided his clearest example of this maxim when he told the story of Telemachus in Books I through IV. Athena herself guided the young son of Odysseus, a fact one should not overlook. Homer had a simple point to make in having this goddess guide Telemachus on his educational journey: he wished to make it clear no-one could acquire virtue without divine assistance. Before Athena’s divine intervention Telemachus displayed no signs of virtue, he could neither rid his father’s house of

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usurpers nor protect his mother. Pindar picked up on this idea, adding that “Inborn glory grants a man superiority; and he who must be taught must ride the variant winds of mediocrity and stumble toward the limitless perfection in his futile dreams” (Pindar 140).

Homer did more than provide a model of education for his audience; the same words that came out of the bard’s mouth would be exalted as a standard of excellence by which future Greeks would judge poetry. Aristotle considered him “divinely inspired” (Aristotle 93), and continued later saying “Homer deserves praise for many things and especially for this, that of all poets he does not fail to understand what he ought to do himself. The poet should speak as seldom as possible in his own character, since he is not “representing” the story in that sense” (Aristotle 97). Throughout the history of ancient Greece, even long after the fall of the aristocratic ages best represented by Homer’s characters and morals, Greeks respected him at the very least as a model of poetry, even if they had perverted his standard of **virtues**.

Unlike Homer's emphasis on individual excellence, Aristotle classified social relations in a hierarchy from family to polis. When the polis came to dominate the individual and family priorities of the sort Homer supported, the **virtues** he taught still existed, but changed their focus. The warrior no longer fought hoping to increase his own aretê. Instead, he fought for the greater glory and protection of the state. Warfare changed to accommodate the rise of the polis; the regimental combat of the hoplites replaced individual combat so supported by Homer. Amongst all the Greek city-states, Sparta provided the best example of his change, particularly in the poetry of Tyrtaeus. His war songs brilliantly exhibited the change in warfare. His first war-song starts “Now it is noble for a brave man to die, having fallen opposite the foremost ranks, whilst fighting for his father-land” (Tyrtaeus 327). The individual no longer existed save as a tool of the polis. Aretê had narrowed its definition down to excellence in the field of war, having “the

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courage to face the bloody slaughter . . . is excellence, this the best prize among men, and noblest for a young man to carry off" (Tyrtaeus 331). For the Spartans constricted aretê to a warlike excellence for the greater good of the state. Like Homer's morality these dictates expressed absolute commands of good and bad, but their focus had changed from the individual to the collective.

Education changed to accommodate these distorted goals. The Spartan state reared the children of its citizens from a young age for the sole purpose of becoming hoplite soldiers. Plutarch's *Life of Lycurgus* explained this educational system: "The Spartan children were not, in that manner, under tutors purchased or hired with money, nor were the parents at liberty to educate them as they pleased; but, as soon as they were seven years old, Lycurgus ordered them to be enrolled in companies. . ." (Plutarch 123). The Homeric master-apprentice sort of educational relationship only survived in an adoption of the twelve-year-old boys by older men so the older men in the relationship could serve as "their fathers, guardians and governors" (Plutarch 125). Though this relationship certainly bore similarities to the Homeric education, it did occur on the same terms. The older men chose the boys, as opposed to a mutual relationship.

Despite these changes, Sparta continued to believe aretê belonged only to those blessed by the Gods. Tyrateus addressed the Spartans as such: "But since ye are the race of invincible Hercules, be ye of good courage; not yet hath Zeus turned his neck aside from you," and elsewhere, "For Zeus himself, son of Cronos, husband of beautiful crowned Herè, hath given this city to the Heracleids [descendants of Hercules]. Along with whom, having left windy Erineès, we arrived at the broad isle of Pelops" (Tyrtaeus 329, 335). According to Homer, Achilles was the son of the nymph Thetis. The Spartans claimed descent from Hercules and blessings from Zeus, and imply that without these divine benefactors their state could not have existed as it did.

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Tyrtaeus hardly stood alone in picking up the Homeric moral and poetical tradition. Pindar took ahold of the same tradition, but chose an entirely different path. Pindar wrote most famously to commemorate the accomplishments of athletes at various games. He begins his sixth Isthmian Ode:

> If a man is pleased with cost and effort and
> Achieves an excellence informed by deity,
> And his fate implants in him the seeds
>   Of handsome fame, he, divinely honored, drops
> His anchor in the depth of happiness. (Pindar 197)

This poem, and most of Pindar's poems in general, focused on the individual man and the aretê he gained from performing well in contest. Contrasted with the Spartan ideal of an earlier age, these odes celebrate peaceful contest. Sophistry eventually sprang from this attitude of virtue; with the increasingly personalized ideal of virtue most of the Greek cities lost the objective ideal and replaced it with an argument in which both sides posit to have a truth (as opposed to aspiring to *the* truth).

Most other Greek city-states likely experienced an aristocratic stage like that of Sparta, and almost all took up the banner of state education. Nevertheless, the other cities of Greece moved on while Sparta remained frozen by its constitution. As these other states moved more and more toward democracy the advent of sophistry slowly destructed the objective sense of aretê and justice present in Homer and the older poets. Thucydides gave a famous example in his account of Pericles' words: "Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now. We do not need the praises of a Homer, or of anyone else whose words may delight us for the moment, but whose estimation of facts will fall short of what is really true" (Thucydides

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148). Pericles, a dictator and a sophist, wanted to separate Homeric morality from the present and create his own order. Yearning for a return to an older, objective scale a variety of critics and philosophers took up the mantle of defending the older ideals. Aristophanes, in his *Clouds*, addressed the problem:

> Leader of the Chorus: Come then, you, who crowned men of the other days with so many virtues, plead the cause dear to you, make yourself known to us.
>
> Just Discourse: Very well, I will tell you what was the old education, when I used to teach justice with so much success and when modesty was held in veneration. . . At the master's house they had to stand with their legs apart and they were taught to sing either, "Pallas, the Terrible, who overturneth cities," or "A noise resounded from afar" in the solemn tones of the ancient harmony. (James 113)

Just Discourse described an education in which the remains of a Homeric education remain. The student had to practice the recitation of poetry as well as physical strength. In fact, Just Discourse continued with the effects of physical effects of either education, asserting that following the education of the sophists will lead only to a withered physique and knowledge over "how to spin forth long-winded arguments on law" (James 113). This struck many Greeks as an empty knowledge. What point did education serve if it led to no greater good, no real glorification of the self beyond the ability to win petty arguments?

Athens, then, became the most famous place for responding to these longwinded law arguments. Plato, and, in some ways, Aristotle, hoped to bring back the idea of an overarching moral goal behind education. On the subject of poetry Plato wrote

> There is a third form of possession or madness, of which the Muses are the source. This seizes a tender, virgin soul and stimulates it to rapt passionate expression, especially in

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> lyric poetry, glorifying the countless mighty deeds of ancient times for the instruction of posterity. But if any man come to the gates of poetry without the madness of the Muses, persuaded that skill alone will make him a good poet, then shall he and his works of sanity with him be brought to nought by the poetry of madness, and behold, their place is nowhere to be found. (Plato 492)

In his Republic Plato proposed expelling all the poets from his imaginary utopia, as they did not help in the attainment of the perfect corporal structure of a society he had in mind. The above quote explains that poetry still contained value, especially that of Homer. Plato protested not the moralizing, soul-reforming poetry of Homer, but the petty ballads that had become common by his time. He wished to give education meaning again, and to escape the meaningless pedantic traps the sophists had made into creation.

Even though the precise definition of Homeric ideals changed through the course of Greek history, the Greeks cited again and again that perhaps mythical poet who first wrote them at dawn of Ionian civilization. Homer created an educational ideal with a consistent moral code by which they could make judgements, a code in which the Greeks educated their children. Ancient Greek education consistently acted either in accordance with or in reaction to this code. The sophists' idea of aretê was not Homer's, but it was a perversion of the poet's. The Spartans, when they created state education, hoped to inculcate the same virtues Homer taught; they aspired to create new little Achilles'. Homer's education has lasted through the varying trials and perversions that challenged its supremacy to reach even the 21st century. We are no sons of Homer, but to say the ancient poet does not influence us would be rather far from the truth.

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