What Does it Mean to be Good? Homeric Origins

Around the late eighth or early seventh century BC, two great epic poems were written, the Iliad and the Odyssey. These are attributed to Homer, about whom we know nothing. These poems, written in what is called Homeric or Epic Greek, have had an immense influence not only on ancient Greek culture and education, but also on Western civilisation.

In the Homeric poems we see reflected a particular kind of society (actual or idealized), one in which "the most important judgments that can be passed upon a man concern the way in which he discharges his allotted social function."[1] The Homeric world is one in which society is "characterized by a recognized hierarchy of functions."[2] To be a king or a warrior, to be a judge or a shepherd, involves discharging a particular social function. In each case certain qualities are deemed to be necessary for the discharging of such social functions. For example, a king needs to be authoritative, a soldier courageous and a judge just.

It is also important to understand that in Homeric society to call someone 'good' (*agathos*) or 'noble' (*esthelos*) or to say he possesses 'virtue' (*aretē*) is to use elitist language. Such terms are not used for those deemed to be outside the social order, such as slaves. In effect, the slave is not a person but a chattel, a thing.

Our word "good" is derived from the Greek word *agathos* and, today, is the standard translation of this word. Homer used the adjectives *agathos* and *esthelos* ("noble") to commend the deeds of his heroes. It is very important for us to understand that when Homer says a hero was "good" or "noble" he is not concerned at all about whether the hero had good intentions. All he is saying is that the hero was successful, that he did not fail. He is "good" and "noble' because he has demonstrated his ability to function and embrace his destiny within the layer of the society to which he belongs.

In the *Iliad* King Agamemnon is a thoroughly detestable person. Despite this he is still "good" (*agathos*), even though Achilles is even more so. Today, when we call someone a good person, we typically mean that he or she has a fine moral character. We have in mind the internal moral state of that person. Clearly, for Homer 'goodness' is a very different thing.

Originally, the word *agathos* was associated with a particular social function, that of a Homeric nobleman. To discharge this function well a Homeric nobleman needed to be *agathos*. At this point in history, as we have seen, the word *agathos* is not exchangeable with our word "good." For the Homeric nobleman to be *agathos* was to "be brave, skilful and successful in war and in peace" (Adkins). This in turn presupposed that the nobleman possessed the wealth and leisure (in peace) that are prerequisite for him to be *agathos* and which are the natural reward for being *agathos* in the discharge of his social function. Indeed, military prowess, wealth and high social status are all implied by Homeric use of *agathos*, as qualities that must occur together.[3] So in the Homeric poems this term is predicated of a warrior aristocracy. The function expected of an *agathos* above all others was that of defending his own household (*oikos*).[4]

Obviously our use of the word "good" in English is quite different. After all, we can speak of someone being good even though he is not characterised by being majestic and by his courage and cunning. But in Homeric society it would be a contradiction to speak of someone being *agathos* who was not at the same time characterised by qualities of majesty, courage and cleverness.

It is the performance of a man which will determine whether it is right to call him *agathos* or not. If he has fought, plotted and ruled with success then he is *agathos* and if he has not then he is not

agathos. It is no use a person pointing out that failure was unavoidable and that lack of success lay outside his personal control. The person who has failed to discharge his social function is subject to blame and penalty for failing to be *agathos*.

In Homer the adjective *agathos* is also closely linked with the noun *aretē*, which is often translated as "virtue." Yet again we need to discriminate between Homer's understanding of 'virtue' and our modern concepts. For Homer, it is the person who fulfils the social function allotted to him who is said to possess such 'virtue' (*aretē*). According to this understanding, a king is 'virtuous' if he shows an ability to command; a warrior is virtuous if he displays courage; a cobbler by his displayed skill in cobbling shoes; a wife is virtuous if she practices fidelity. In the latter case, fidelity is not virtuous because the wife is conforming to some absolute or universal standard of morality, but because she is fulfilling the social function expected of her.

In Homeric society a person experiences shame (*aidōs*) when he fails to fulfil the social functions expected of him. The most powerful moral force is not the fear of the gods but the fear of ridicule from others in society. For Homer the highest good is honour, public esteem (*timē*).

Homeric society is essentially a 'shame-culture.' The Homeric hero is fundamentally concerned with his own 'competence, potency, or power' and this necessarily sets him in competition with others. This is so even when he is engaged in joint activities with others. For his primary concern is that of defending his own interests – his honour, his property, his family. But this competitive streak still allows for cooperation if such cooperation is seen as a means of increasing his share of honour and property. If it ceases to do that he may well withdraw.[5] However, it is important not to overstate this dimension of competitiveness. Status trumps competition and it is the pressures of one's status that really causes Homeric warriors to risk their lives on the battlefield.[6]

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics. A history of moral philosophy from the Homeric age to the twentieth century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) 5.

[2] MacIntyre, 8.

[3] Ian Morris & Barry B. Powell, *A New Companion to Homer* (Brill, 1997) 699.

[4] Morris & Powell, 702.

[5] See Carl A. Rubino & Cynthia W. Shelmerdine*, Approaches to Homer* (University of Texas Press, 2014). https://books.google.com.au/books?id=txSCBAAAQBAJ&pg=PT240&lpg=PT240&dq=homer+ethics+OR+morality+-simpson&source=bl&ots=ME2nzvmfrx&sig=4XT7a26ig21EBZPC_x0HmYQwFJY&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjS94uAp6HTAhWLqVQKHcJIBD44FBDoAQgjMAE#v=onepage&q=homer%20ethics%20OR%20morality%20-simpson&f=false Viewed 13/4/17

[6] Margarlit Finkelberg, "Timē and Aretē in Home" in *The Classical Quarterly*. New Series 48/1 (1998) 18.