

Man as Hero - Hero as Citizen
Models of Heroic Thought and Action
in Homer, Plato and Rousseau

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Discipline of Politics
School of History and Politics
The University of Adelaide
December 2004

Frontispiece

Illustration included in print copy of thesis:

Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Socrates* (1787)

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Abstract

Ever since Homer told the tales of magnificent men and called these men heroes, the siren song of heroic achievement has been impossible to resist. By consistently acting in a manner that is above the capacity of normal human beings, a hero becomes a model of emulation and inspiration for ordinary, lesser mortals. This thesis traces the development of normative models of heroic thought and action in the work of Homer, Plato and Rousseau. It argues that models of heroism have evolved according to changing conceptions of the political institutions that comprise a *polis* and, in turn, notions of citizenship.

Homer establishes the heroic ideal and offers an image of *Man as Hero*. The Homeric hero is a man of transparent action who is never incapacitated because he acts upon his instincts. Unrestrained by doubt, he soars above humanity and performs deeds that assure him of everlasting fame and glory. The Homeric hero is a warrior-prince who lives in the absence of a *polis*. He rules his community as a patriarch who places his personal quest for glory above the dictates of the common good. The Homeric hero is consequently limited in his ability to act as a model of emulation for those who live in a *polis*.

In an historical period that gave rise to the *polis* as a desirable and unavoidable aspect of human life, Plato remodels heroic ideals. Thus Plato's ideals of heroism could survive and prosper alongside political structures and institutions guided by the demands of the common good. The philosophical hero exalted in the Platonic dialogues gains true knowledge, which enables him to excel at all activities he undertakes. The philosopher is impelled to channel his vast superiority into the realm of political leadership. Plato recasts the *Hero as Citizen*, an elite citizen who rules for the benefit of all. Plato's model of heroism, like Homer's, is premised on an anti-egalitarian, hierarchical conception of human worth.

In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau aims to reconcile modern ideals of human equality with Homeric and Platonic hierarchical notions of heroic excellence. The *Social Contract* attempts to make all citizens equally heroic by insisting that men can only excel when they all participate equally in political sovereignty. Failing to reconcile heroism and equality, however, Rousseau chooses heroism and reverts firstly to aristocratic political formulas before finally abandoning politics altogether as a positive force for humanity. His work nevertheless inspired both a lasting notion of human equality that shaped the modern political landscape and evoked the romantic modern notion of an isolated individual, as epitomised by Rousseau himself, heroically climbing the peaks of human achievement. Rousseau's model of individual heroism effectively completes the cycle and returns the notion of heroism to where it began with Homer, *Man as Hero*.

The concept of the heroism, traced through these theorists, shows it to be a changing terrain yet consistent in its allure.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, where deposited in the University library, being made available for photocopying and loan.

Dominic Paul Stefanson

December 3, 2004

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Politics Discipline and the broader School of History and Politics at the University of Adelaide for providing the space, conditions and a supportive environment in which to work for the duration of this thesis. The administrative staff of the Discipline, Chris McElhinney, Tina Esca and Mel Pearson, have provided invaluable practical assistance throughout the duration of my thesis.

I am deeply grateful to my two supervisors, Associate Professor Paul Corcoran and Dr Vicki Spencer. Both have been unremittingly professional in their dealings with me. I always felt more positive about my work leaving a meeting with Paul than I had entering it. His breadth of knowledge of and deep respect for the canonical texts has certainly influenced my thinking. Vicki's analytical sharpness has enriched the contents of this thesis. I often knew a chapter was finished when her questions written in the margins of an earlier draft were answered. In my case, it has proved to be a myth that one finishes a thesis disliking their supervisors. I walk away with two enhanced friendships.

I would also like to thank all the members of the Adelaide University Political Theory Group who have lent a spirit of camaraderie to the essentially isolated and lonely life of academic pursuits. The questions and criticisms raised of my work in the Theory Group Sessions have also enhanced this thesis. The many friends I have made during the writing of this thesis have provided tremendous support. From a long list I would like to single out Jonathon Louth, Peter Maclaren and Roger Knight. I am also appreciative of my friends outside of the university environment who have taken what I do seriously and provided immense encouragement.

My last salute is for Kylie Heneker, who gave so much. I love my Kyles and she loves me. I could never ask for more than I have and continue to receive.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the two other Stefansons: my son, Jesse Stefanson and my mother, Blandine Stefanson. I hope it is worthy.

Portions of the following chapters appeared in the following publications:

Chapters 1 and 3:

Stefanson, D., "Nature and Human Action in Homer and Plato", *Aumla* (Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association), No.96, November 2001, pp.19-34.

Stefanson, D., "The Duel as a Reconciliation of Homeric and Socratic Values," *Australasian Political Studies Association Conference Proceedings*, 2000, on-line: <http://apsa2000.anu.edu.au/confpapers>

Chapters 5 and 6:

Stefanson, D., "Rousseau's Reveries: The Juvenile Independence of the Solitary Walker," *Australasian Political Studies Association Conference Proceedings*, 2004, on-line: <http://www.adelaide.edu.au/apsa/papers/>

INTRODUCTION

When Odysseus returns to his native Island of Ithaca after ten years of the Trojan War and ten years overcoming ordeals on his homeward journey, he towers over the young men who have stayed behind and in his absence have tried to usurp his wife, Penelope, and his palace. Odysseus surpasses these Suitors in every conceivable manner: he has greater strength, intelligence, eloquence, determination and courage, and he is better looking. The *Odyssey* ends when Odysseus marks his superiority by slaughtering all the “Suitors” with the ease of a lion killing fawns. Odysseus’ superiority over the young nobles on Ithaca extends beyond martial ability and traverses many aspects of life including mundane, quotidian activities. Indeed, he boasts that “no mortal can compete with me in manual skills” such as laying a fire, carving and roasting meat, and pouring wine (*Od.* 15, 321-3). The hero is a man who, like Odysseus, consistently acts above the human norm in all activities he undertakes. A fascination with heroes has endured since Homer wrote the epics. The siren song of heroism continues to enchant because no one would choose to be less than what they may be; no one would aspire to be a Suitor when they could be Odysseus.

This thesis argues that the work of Homer, Plato and Rousseau has been instrumental in both forming and meeting humanity’s yearning for heroic models. Homer, Plato and Rousseau are like alchemists who believe they have found the secret formula that can turn human material into gold, men into heroes. They present normative models of thought and action that aim to transform men like the Suitors into men like Odysseus. I argue that Homer established the dream of the heroic by telling the tales of prodigious men and calling these men heroes. Plato, in turn, argued that such superior beings ought to partake in the communal life of the *polis*, thus allowing the ideal of heroism to prosper into an age that came to see life in a political association as an inherently superior model for human life. Finally, Rousseau attempted to extend heroism to all men and enable the dream of the heroic to survive into an era that valued the equal worth of men.

Who is a hero?

The hero consistently and continually acts above the human norm and by doing so serves as a model of what men might hope to achieve. Herein lies the basis of the definition of the heroic used in this thesis.

[The hero] possessed a consistent capacity for action that surpasses the norm of man or woman. This contrast between what may be heroic in action and what identifies a hero in the purest sense of the term is essential. Both morally and physically, the hero is nevertheless *of* the human species, not superior to it, not beyond it. Even if his earliest prototypes are partially divine, the hero is, in his prime, fully human rather than superhuman. A rare configuration of traits and a striking style of action mark him as having *arete*, excellence. In excelling and exceeding himself, the hero becomes a model of higher potential for his clan, his race, his nation, and even for humanity at large.¹

A hero is a mortal human who acts in a manner that exceeds the human norm in a vast range of activities. The hero is not “superhuman” because whilst he possesses traits and qualities that are superior to the average man, he is not biologically different to other men. The word “hero”, and its derivatives, is used freely and loosely in popular rhetoric in a manner that does not conform to this classic meaning suggested by Lash. It appears in advertising campaigns to attract blood donors, on father’s day cards and is used in plague proportions to praise sporting achievements. In particular, the differentiation between an heroic act and a hero is overlooked when a person who runs into a burning home to save a child is called a hero in the following day’s newspaper. The act is heroic because it is beyond the realm of normal human behaviour, but it does not confer heroic status on the actor because it is not part of a consistent pattern of behaviour. One heroic act does not make a hero. The difference between people’s deeds and their character is stressed by Aristotle, for whom “a man is not a villain or a scoundrel by the performance of a bad act or a few bad actions.”² For Aristotle, a man should be judged upon reflection of his life as a whole (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.x,1100a-1101b).

¹ Lash, J., *The Hero: Manhood and Power*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.5.

² Anscombe, G., “Modern Moral Philosophy,” *Virtue Ethics*, eds Crisp, R., & Slote, M., pp. 26-44, p.31.

The models of heroism presented in this thesis are solely masculine. Homer, Plato and Rousseau do not use man in a generic sense of mankind or humanity, but mean uniquely males when they refer to men. The Homeric hero was a man, as only a warrior can be heroic and only a male is physiologically capable of being a warrior. There is, however, no need for the Homeric male to restrain from displaying traditionally conceived female traits because there is no psychological distinction between the genders for Homer. Notwithstanding the proposed gender equalisation for the ruling classes in the *Republic*, Plato's oeuvre resonates with the psychological as well as the physiological divide between men and women. Indeed, Plato plays a major role in establishing the traditional gender distinctions. For Plato, the female is irrational and the man is rational. As the philosophic hero is the supreme rationalist, it is incumbent upon the hero to expunge any feminine traits from his character. Rousseau adopts the roles defined by Aristotle for women and men and applies Plato's psychological distinctions to the genders. He further augments gender distinctions with his obsessive attention to the corrupting effect that allowing women into the public sphere would have upon the men already participating in political processes. The broader ideals of heroism established by these three thinkers can be transferred to females by a modern reader so long as the modern reader realises that the framework of assumptions within which the hero was originally conceived would also need to be changed.

The hero's superiority must also traverse different fields. Olympic champions consistently act beyond normal human capacity by going faster, longer and higher. They show that the boundaries of what is physically possible for humanity extend farther than the limitations of ordinary people. Generally, these sports-people are superior humans, but only in one isolable respect. They cannot rightly be called heroes because their excellence is limited to their specialist sphere of endeavour.

Some exceptional Olympians may still claim or have attributed to them genuine heroic status. Olympians were until recent decades non-professionals striving for and achieving excellence without receiving payment. Even in many cases today, Olympians make personal sacrifices to devote themselves to the cause of victory and personal glory; a personal glory that is shared by their nation. In some rare cases the Olympian may act as a model of inspiration and aspiration for a wider

community, or even a whole nation. Cathy Freeman, the Australian sprinter of Aboriginal parentage who won gold in the 400-metre sprint at the Sydney 2000 Olympics, is a case in point. Heroic status was thrust upon her by the Australian public eager to cast her as model of the newly reconciled Australian and a source of hope and inspiration for the wider Aboriginal community. Mohammed Ali has been viewed under the same light in the United States. Cathy Freeman's acclaimed rise to heroic status, under the criteria established after full consideration is given to the models of heroism presented by Homer, Plato and Rousseau, will be reviewed in the conclusion to this thesis, albeit without their gender bias.

The hero, then, as conceived by Homer, Plato and Rousseau, is a male of exceptional ability who excels at a vast range of activities and in doing so becomes a model of aspiration for others.

Models of Heroism

To abstract any one element – in this case the quest for heroes – from the work of Homer, Plato and Rousseau is not meant to imply that these three thinkers share a unique bond, or that each offers a logical continuation of the work of his chronological predecessor. Nor am I claiming that this is the only viable sequence of thinkers in examining the development of heroic models in Western political thought.

So why Homer, Plato and Rousseau? Homer made the dream of the heroic possible by depicting a way of life that produces individual men who display a superiority over ordinary men in all activities they undertake. Homer shows how a man can grow into a hero. He forges *Man as Hero*. Homer's heroes live in the absence of a *polis*, which is defined by Aristotle as a political association with "constitutions that aim at the common good" (*Politics* III.vi, 1279a). The Homeric heroes are community leaders whose individual brilliance serves primarily themselves. The absence of the *polis* and consequently of notions and constraints of citizenship in the Homeric epics limits the width and breadth of the Homeric heroes' role as models of emulation for later readers. The Homeric heroes cannot serve as models for citizenship because they lack self-restraint and the subordination to the common interests of the wider community that mark a citizen.

Plato politicises the notion of heroism by compelling the heroic philosopher to enter into the service of the state. Plato transforms the heroic man into a citizen. Redefining the *Hero as Citizen* permits the ideal of heroism to continue to prosper in an era that came to see political activity as an unavoidable component of man's existence. Yet the ideals of heroism in Plato remain hierarchical and aristocratic, like they were for Homer.

Rousseau, in the *Social Contract*, struggles to place ideals of human excellence and heroic achievement into an egalitarian framework. By extending the ideal of heroic achievement to all citizens, Rousseau moulds heroes into citizens that fit into a sense of citizenship based on modern principles of equality and democracy, principles that Rousseau did as much as anyone to establish in the lexicon of mainstream political discourse. However, failing to reconcile equality and heroic achievement in the confines of a state, Rousseau later adopts a model of individual heroism that is exclusively male and aristocratic. He closes the cycle and returns the dream of heroism to where it had started with Homer: *Man as Hero*. Yet an ideal of heroism that excludes all women and only applies to a tiny number of exceptionally talented men cannot serve as a model for political organisation for modern liberal democracies.

“The fierce devotion of the few,” Reisenberg noted of active Greek citizenship, “has been replaced with the slack association of the many”³ in post-1789 conceptions of the modern citizen. Modern conceptions of liberal citizenship place minimal obligations on citizens and the ambition of the polity extends no further than securing the conditions that may enable individual citizens to prosper. On T.H. Marshall's distinction between the different elements of citizenship, the civil element that secures individual rights of freedom and liberty and equality before the law has become dominant.⁴ The notion that the state should create and mould individuals

³ Reisenberg, P., *Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1992, p.xix.

⁴ Marshall famously and neatly divides citizenship into three components: civil, political and social. The civil aspect of citizenship comprises individual rights of liberty and freedom, the political element is “the right to participate in the exercise of political power,” and the social element is “the right to share in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing

who realise their full heroic potential is antithetical to liberal citizenship formulated in differing ways by thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Adam Smith. Ideals of heroism have been pushed out of the central sphere of politics and have taken residence in peripheral and symbolic fields of human activities. Heroic acts continue to be celebrated, but genuine heroes in the sense envisaged by Homer, Plato and Rousseau, amongst others, are not to be found. Normative doctrines specifically recommended for hero creation are extinct. Today heroes may be said to exist on sporting fields and in movies or literature, but creating heroes is not the aim or purpose of modern political and social institutions. Political and social institutions today are founded on equality and are committed, for good or ill, to eschewing, if not actually suppressing, desires of superior human achievement.

Homer

As the first written works of Western literature, the Homeric epics provide a natural starting place for any seminal theme that runs through Western culture, philosophy or politics. When that theme is heroism, Homer is not only a natural starting place, but an essential one. The etymological definition of hero is inextricably linked to Homer. Homer starts the *Iliad* by asking the Muse to sing of “the anger of Achilles” that “many a *hero* did it yield to a prey to dogs” (*Il.* I, 1-2). Hero in modern languages comes directly from the Greek *hērōs* (sing.) and *hērōēs* (pl.), as used by Homer to describe his main protagonists. In the ancient world, the term *hērōs* was already in use to describe the great men of the Homeric epics. In Plato’s *Republic*, the characters of the epics are referred to as “famous men” (387e, 390d) or “heroes” (391 d).⁵ More recently, the 1694 edition of the French *Dictionnaire de L’Académie* listed

in the society.” Marshall, T. H., “Citizenship and Social Class [1949]” *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development: Essays by T. H., Marshall*, Double Day, New York, 1964, pp. 65-122, pp.71-2.

⁵ The term hero is also used to describe the men of the Homeric epics in *Minos* 318e-319d. The authorship of the *Minos* is widely considered spurious, cf. *Complete Works*, eds. Cooper, J. & Hutchinson, D., Hackett, Indianapolis & Cambridge, 1997, p. 1308. The hero, for Plato, in the sense of the semi-mythical, semi-historical character is the descendant of a god or goddess. The historic definition of hero given in the fourth edition [1762] of the *Dictionnaire de L’Académie* also makes this distinction and only confers heroism in the historical sense to those of divine ancestry. The hero of antiquity is “celui qui était né d’un dieu ou d’une déesse et d’une personne mortelle.” Cited in Simon, P-H., *Le domaine héroïque des lettres françaises: Xe-XIXe siècle*, Armand Colin, Paris, 1963, p.11. The *OED* makes this distinction in its historical definition: “The later notion included men of renown supposed to be deified on account of great and noble deeds, for which they were also venerated generally or locally; also demigods, said to be the off-spring of a god or goddess and a human being; the two classes being to a great extent coincident.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, on-line, 2004. In the Homeric world-view, however, I argue that a mortal descendant of a god is fully human. Finkelberg

three meanings for the word *héros*: “According to pagan antiquity, this title is given to those who, by a great merit (*valeur*), distinguish themselves from other men.” The other two meanings listed refer to men who commit acts of great merit (*valeur*), or men who excel at a particular virtue.⁶ *Valeur* is defined in the same dictionary as “[b]ravery, valiance, and virtue that consists of courageous combat either in attack or defence.” The noted French critic, Simon, had no hesitation in attributing the historic meaning of hero, as drawn from “Pagan Antiquity,” in the Academy’s dictionary to “Homer’s heroes.”⁷ The first definition for hero in the current on-line *Oxford English Dictionary* is also an historical definition linked explicitly to Homer: “*Antiq.* A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage or ability.”⁸ Given that the meaning of the word hero is derived, in the first instance, from the Homeric epics, an understanding of the notion of heroism through the ages is etymologically dependent on an understanding of the principal protagonists of the Homeric epics.

Whilst they are works of poetry, the Homeric epics answer the fundamental question of philosophy: How can a person best live his or her life? Obviously, Homer’s “answer” is not presented as a systematic treatise, and this distinguishes Homer from Plato and Rousseau. The philosophical question is nonetheless answered in the form of the “heroic code.” The “heroic code” is the set of moral and social norms that guide the few men in Homeric society that have the privilege of being born into aristocratic families and have the opportunity to undertake the noble challenge of becoming heroic. Within this code lies the formula for producing a man who is twice the ordinary man.

The first chapter of this thesis argues that the greatness of the Homeric hero rests primarily on his rare ability to act in all circumstances. His lack of duplicity and

explains that “the religious aspect of the word ‘hero’ is completely alien to the Homeric epic, either because the formative stage of the Greek epic tradition preceded the development of the phenomenon of the hero-cult or because for some reason or another this tradition preferred to ignore this phenomenon.” Finkelberg, M., “Odysseus and the Genus Hero,” *Greece and Rome*, xlii(1), April, 1995, n.1, p.12.

⁶ Cited in Simon, *Le domaine héroïque, op. cit.*, p.11. The translation is my own. The *OED* also gives similar subsequent definitions.

⁷ Simon, *Le domaine héroïque, op. cit.*, p.11.

⁸ *Oxford English Dictionary*, on-line, 2004.

disingenuousness leads to decisive action. The Homeric hero is never incapacitated, regardless of how difficult or trying circumstances become. He has the ability to think through a problem quickly, decide upon his course of action, articulate that decision, and then enact it. The Homeric hero says what he thinks and does what he says. He is transparent. He is never bogged down in a mire of introspection or self-doubt. A seeming lack of reflection should not be mistaken for brutishness or a mindless devotion to action devoid of thought or speech. The lack of torturous self-reflection does, however, allow the Homeric hero to perform great deeds that are unrestrained by doubt. Homer's implicit doctrine of heroism singles out men who mingle freely with Gods and perform deeds that assure their immortality by living on forever in the stories and songs of men who follow. Homer's heroes would inspire and serve as a model for personal behaviour for generations of later Greeks and, to an extent, they continue to serve as models of desirable behaviour up to this very day as witnessed by the recent Hollywood Blockbuster based on the *Iliad, Troy*.

Chapter two proposes that the epics do not offer a normative political doctrine.⁹ Homer's hero is the patriarch of the leading family of a small agrarian community that exists in the absence of established political and legal institutions, that is to say, in the absence of a *polis*. A *polis*, for Aristotle, is a "political association" (*Politics* I.i, 1252a). For the Ancient Greeks, the city and the state were considered one and the same, and both were designated by the word *polis*. In a *polis*, political rule is exercised over equals and in the common interest. For Aristotle, a *polis* can only be rightly regarded as legitimate if it meets its teleological imperative of serving the common good. "[T]hose constitutions which aim at the common good are right ...; whilst those which aim only at the good of the rulers are wrong. ... They

⁹ The claim that the epics do not offer a normative political doctrine goes against much recent Homeric scholarship and will be defended in Chapter 2. For works that argue that Homer defends an embryonic form of the *polis* in the epics see Scully, S., *Homer and the Scared City*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1990; Seaford, R., *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994; Dunkle, R., "Swift-Footed Achilles," *Classical World*, 90(4), March/April 1997, pp.227-235; Finkelberg, M., "Time and Arete in Homer," *Classical Quarterly*, 48(I), 1998, pp.14-28; Farenga, V., "Narrative and Community in Dark Age Greece: A Cognitive and Communicative Approach to Early Greek Citizenship," *Arethusa*, 31(2), 1998, pp.179-206; Hammer, D., "Who Shall Readily Obey? Authority and Politics in the *Iliad*," *Phoenix*, 51(1), 1997, pp.1-24; Rose, P., "Therites and the Plural Voices of Homer," *Arethusa*, 21(1), Spring 1988, pp.5-26; Rose, P., "Ideology in the *Iliad*: *Polis*, *Basileus*, *Theoi*," *Arethusa*, 30(2), pp.151-199; Raaflaub, K., "Politics and Interstate Relations in the World of the Early Greek *Poleis*," *Antichon*, Vol. 31, 1997, pp.1-27.

are like rule of master over slave, whereas the state is an association of free men” (*Politics* III.vi, 1279a). Democracy, it should be noted, does not necessarily constitute a “correct” *polis* because it is often literally rule by the people in the interests of the people, that is, one faction – the mob – ruling in its own interests and this, for Aristotle, is tyrannical in the same manner as one man ruling for his personal interests (*Politics* III.vii, 1279a). Conversely, a monarch who rules in the common interest and submits to the rule of law, like all other men, is the sovereign of a legitimate *polis*. An association of free men requires political rule by persuasion rather than force.

The Homeric hero rules his community like a patriarch or master of slaves, that is, he simply commands with his power premised on enforcing his will. The distinction between persuading equals and commanding unequals marks the difference between a political association and pre-political relationship, for example between master and slave or patriarch and family in Book I of Aristotle’s *Politics*. Brute enforcement of rule is an essentially pre-political way of conducting human relations.¹⁰ In practical terms, the *polis* consists of the civil structures and institutions organised to administer the common affairs of a community. Such institutions are absent from the Homeric epics.

Aristotle’s definition of a *polis* may appear demanding but the underlying principle of rule in the common interest to confer political legitimacy underpins many definitions of state.¹¹ The common interest can be conceived modestly as endeavouring to guarantee continuing life for citizens (*Politics*, III.vi, 1278b). Hobbes’ contract of total submission to a sovereign in return for protection and security would constitute, for Aristotle, a limited and deeply flawed *polis*, but a legitimate *polis* nonetheless.

There is no *polis* in the society depicted in the Homeric epics, and there is no suggestion of one. The hero is a self-serving local chieftain who subordinates the

¹⁰ This distinction is also drawn by Arendt. Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* [1958], The University of Chicago Press, [Second Ed.] intro. Canovan, M., 1998, pp.26-7.

¹¹ For competing definitions of state see Heywood, A., *Politics*, Macmillan, 1997, pp.84-93.

demands of the common good to his personal interests and his quest for immortal glory. At times, the interests of the common good and the interests of the hero will coincide, as when the hero places himself at the vanguard of the battle and risks his life to help defend the community whilst securing glory for himself. Helping the community is not, however, the hero's primary motivation, desire or intent in bearing arms. He risks his life to secure his personal glory and the stake of his *oikos* (household) in the community. Heroes sometimes defend their communities against external aggression, yet at other times, they pull their communities into unnecessary and avoidable conflicts. In both cases the hero is driven by personal interests. The conflict between Paris and Menelaus over Helen is only the most obvious example of heroes dragging entire communities into essentially private conflicts with disastrous consequences for the wider community. Such tales are scattered throughout the *epics* and tales of the past told by Homeric characters. The Homeric hero lacks the drive for self-sacrifice inherently necessary for citizenship.

The Homeric heroes remain silent in guiding men on how to live together in a community with mutual interests and an accepted constitution. The "heroic code" offers no formula for excellence in the sphere of citizen action. Once the primacy of the *polis* and the concomitant primacy of the community over the individual in societal organisation were firmly established in the ancient Greek world, Homer's warriors could not be considered models of excellence in all spheres of life. A reader living in a *polis* could not simply be like Achilles in order to become twice the man he was because neither Achilles nor any of the other Homeric heroes offers guidance on how to act as a citizen. The Homeric heroes only exist as heroes defined as consistently acting above the norm in a vast range of human activities within the political and social environment described in the *epics*. Once the socio-political environment of the reader differs to that of the Homeric hero, the heroes remain helpful guides to heroic behaviour in personal affairs, but they are irrelevant in guiding citizens who share the duties and rewards of association within a common political structure.

Man, according to Aristotle, is a political animal (*zoōn politikon*).¹² The ability to form political associations distinguishes men from other animals and therefore, according to Aristotle's functionalism, the practice of politics is the highest realm of action for a man. Aristotle's other famous definition of man, as being capable of speech and reason (*Politics* I.ii, 1253a, *Nicomachean Ethics* X.vii, 1178a), led him to consider the highest possible life to be the life of contemplation (*bios theoretikos*). Contemplation, which rests on understanding, is not strictly speaking an action. The highest life is one of contemplation whilst the highest action is one of political participation. The broad acceptance, at least in the ancient world, of the Aristotelian and Platonic belief that participation in the life of *polis* was a central component of the best life, displaced the individualistic and pre-political Homeric hero as the model of the highest life. More recently Arendt has equally celebrated the capacity for human beings to undertake heroic action in the political realm, whilst simultaneously cautioning against the dangers of action that is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable.¹³

Plato

The inherent failure of the Homeric epics to offer a model of citizenship informs my decision to feature Plato as the second phase of heroism in Western political thought. In effect, Plato politicises the notion of heroism by demonstrating how a great man can and must contribute to the wellbeing of the *polis*. The Platonic philosopher, like the Homeric hero, is demonstrably superior to other men. His superiority, however, is channelled into the service of the common good. In the Platonic scheme the hero becomes a ruling citizen. He is a citizen in the sense that his actions contribute to the wellbeing of the *polis*, but he is not a citizen in the sense that he is an equal participant in the processes of the *polis*. He is a King dictated to by the demands of true knowledge and the interests of the common good, and the community he leads is an heroic city-state (*politaeia*).

¹² *Inter alia*, *Politics* I.ii 1253a, and *Nicomachean Ethics* I.vii, 1097b

¹³ This is a constant theme in Arendt's *The Human Condition*. See especially, *The Human Condition op. cit.*, pp.144, 173, 190-2, 197, 233, 237, 243-7.

The transformation of men as heroes into heroes as citizens required a new model of heroism. Chapter three examines the new type of heroism established by Socrates and Plato.¹⁴ The Platonic philosopher discovers true knowledge through mastering the weaknesses of the body with rational control. Free of ungoverned visceral impulses, the rational mind gains access to the highest level of truth and knowledge. Armed with true knowledge, a man can bring internal harmony to bear upon his life. The Platonic (and later Aristotelian and Christian Scholastic) imperative to establish the primacy of rational thought over irrational bodily impulses in order to achieve the highest human standard displaced the Homeric doctrine of transparent speech and virile action as the key to individual heroism.

Even in the ancient world, Plato's model had already rivalled and superseded Homer's. The one author quoted more frequently than Homer by Plutarch, the first century AD Greek historian, is Plato. Whilst influenced by Homer, Plutarch describes Plato "in a language which has a religious flavour"¹⁵ as "the guide to virtue" (*Dion* 1.3). Likewise, the early Christians whole-heartedly adopted the notion of cerebral control of bodily passions as the path to virtue.

Testifying to Plato's enduring influence in the modern world is Thomas Carlyle who, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, claimed that the hero, unlike ordinary men, possessed the essentially Platonic trait of seeing through the ephemeral surface of things to the underlying truth of objects and actions.¹⁶ This lasting influence of Plato's philosophical idealism provides a continuous stream of moral and political aspiration into the modern era. Rousseau was effectively writing within a paradigm largely shaped by Plato.

¹⁴ Socrates himself never wrote. Plato participated in Socrates' conversations and later recorded them. The exactitude with which Plato recorded Socrates' conversations and at which point, if ever, he started to use Socrates as a character to advance his own theories cannot be known with certitude. This issue will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3. Broadly speaking, I make no attempt to distinguish between Socratic and Platonic thought.

¹⁵ Wardman, A., *Plutarch's Lives*, Elek Books, London, 1974, 203.

¹⁶ The hero, Carlyle wrote, "looks through the show of things into things." Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, ed. Russel, A., Macmillan Book Co, 1897, p.73. Accordingly, the hero grasps the cause and movement of history rather than its superficial ripples. For Carlyle, the course of history was determined by God and no man, however great, could reverse its directions or act against history, but the hero could channel history.

Throughout the entire Platonic corpus true knowledge and internal harmony enable a person to fulfil a superior mortal's immense potential and excel at all human activities, thus becoming heroic in spheres of action not envisaged by the Homeric hero. The philosopher's dedication to the truth recasts heroic ideals whereby self-sacrifice for an impersonal cause becomes an important component of heroism. The Homeric hero would sacrifice himself on the battlefield, but did so to secure his own immortal glory. Socrates dies in the name of truth. When Socrates is put on trial for corrupting the youth and for impiety, he refuses to modify his stance and conform to the norms of accused men in recanting, showing contrition and seeking forgiveness. When found guilty, Socrates could very well have recast his speech to the Athenian assembly to avoid the death penalty. He is fully aware of what he needed to do to avoid death (*Apology* 38d-39b), and no one doubts his intellectual or rhetorical ability to have done so, but he chooses to die for the truth. Later, Crito offers Socrates the option of escaping prison and again he refuses. Here Socrates places both his duty to the truth and his duty as a citizen of Athens, regardless of how flawed and corrupted he considers the *polis* to be, over his own personal interest. Socrates courageously defends the truth he has fought for all his life in the face of overwhelming forces organised against him. Socrates is immortalised, but this was never his aim. Socrates' self-sacrifice modifies Homer's definition of heroic to incorporate a sense of duty to a higher ideal than that of self-interest. This opens the way for the philosopher to enter into political life where he is driven by concerns that extend beyond his personal wellbeing and individual glory.

A well-balanced life where reason controls or eliminates appetite is the key to the heroic life in Plato. Chapter four argues that this ethical position is assimilated into a political position because Plato maintains in the *Republic*, the *Statesman* and the *Laws* that a successful community is one that is equally well-balanced. The true statesman is one who possesses the ethical knowledge that enables him to give prescriptions for the harmonious living of individuals and the state. The ruler of the *polis*, whether he is called a philosopher (*Republic*), a statesman (*Statesman*), or a legislator (*Laws*), is an expert in the maintenance of well-balanced souls. The *telos* (end goal) of philosophy, as seen by Plato, is statesmanship. The philosopher can do anything to the highest standard, but he is obliged to exercise his heroism primarily in

the unavoidable and omnipresent theatre of state action. The philosopher would not choose to undertake a role of political leadership. He reluctantly accepts a position of public leadership thus sacrificing his true desire to contemplate knowledge unimpeded by external demands. His leadership aims to secure the common good. This is a long way from the Homeric community leader who sought to maximise his individual wealth and glory. The philosopher's heroic leadership will create an heroic state in all ways superior to other modes of communal organisation.

Heroism in the Homeric epics is confined to those who met the requirements of an aristocracy of birth. Heroism achieved through knowledge in the Platonic dialogues is limited to those who meet the requirements demanded by an aristocracy of ability. Socrates repeatedly stresses the difficulty of finding people with the innate abilities required to access true knowledge and the characteristics needed to fulfil these abilities. If such people can be found, they should assume political leadership. Plato's political position is fundamentally anti-democratic and anti-egalitarian. In the same way that the non-political model presented by Homer was superseded by the development of the *polis*, Plato's aristocratic model of political organisation was in turn superseded by developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that cemented the equal moral worth of all men into the political landscape. Plato's citizen King was superseded by the ideal of political equality in citizenship.

Rousseau

For Homer and Plato, only a few men could ever hope to escape the confines of human mediocrity and scale heroic heights. They believed in the irredeemable mediocrity of the majority of people. By contrast, Rousseau believed that the potential for greatness was innate in all men. For Rousseau, a man could only fulfil this potential and achieve greatness when he was independent and whole. The independent man is one without a master. Man becomes whole when his desires and actions correlate and he overcomes the gap between being and appearance. Thus he regains what Starobinski labelled the 'lost transparency' of pre-social man.¹⁷ Rousseau believed that every man had these qualities in his natural state but was

¹⁷ Starobinski, J., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle: suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, p.24.

corrupted by society. As the qualities required to fulfil human potential were seen to exist innately in all men, every man had the equal potential to become heroic. Rousseau's new definition of human fulfilment changed the ideal of heroism from an aristocratic one to an egalitarian one.

Rousseau proposed two methods for overcoming the societal dependence that was the key to civilised man's degradation: an individual solution and a collective solution. The collective solution, the subject of the fifth chapter, takes the form of a newly conceived state where the conditions of natural independence are artificially recreated by providing every individual with self-sovereignty by giving him an equal voice in a political sovereignty that governs all. Rousseau's collective prescription to overcome the mediocrity of humanity opens the road to heroic virtue for all men. Not only is the road open, but all men must travel it in order for the collective solution to work. Neither the collective nor the individual solution is open to women in Rousseau's thinking.

The ideal of directly expressed popular sovereignty outlined in the *Social Contract*, and its expression through the general will, is Rousseau's attempt to realise the grand ambition of reconciling political authority with individual independence and equality. If Rousseau succeeds in democratising sovereignty, it can equally be said that he democratises notions of heroism because, for Rousseau, every man in the polity can only achieve his full potential through exercising his independence by participating in political affairs. Rousseau's democracy is not of the Jeffersonian type that enables the best to lead and sees "aristocracy as the goal of democracy."¹⁸ Rousseau's heroic state is dependent on every single citizen fulfilling the potential for independence through sharing political power equally. For everyone to retain independence whilst living in a civic state, all men must partake equally in establishing the laws by which they abide within the state. Rousseau's political legacy can be seen as the lionisation of the common man in a fraternity of heroes. The qualities attributed to and demanded from the common man are enormous and

¹⁸ Bentley, E., *The Cult of the Superman*, Robert Hale, London, 1947, p. 264.

lead to what Walter Lippmann labels the “omni-competent sovereign” citizen of democratic theory.¹⁹

Rousseau’s fraternity of heroes collapses because even he is driven to the conclusion that not everyone has the desire or capacity to be part of the legislative body. As soon as some members opt out of, or are excluded from, participation, the well-conceived state crumbles and the fate of dependence re-emerges. As soon as one man is no longer active in sovereignty, he becomes dependent on and subordinated to the sovereign body, and the sovereign body becomes equally dependent on his subjection. The ideal of the “omnicompetent, sovereign citizen” places demands on people that far exceed human capacity. Rousseau himself describes the men around him as the “common herd” and “a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants” (*S.C.*, II, 6, p.83). Rousseau concludes that the ideal of an omnicompetent sovereign citizen is desirable, but short of the miraculous changes he conjures in the *Social Contract*, he holds serious reservations about most people’s ability to meet the ideal. Resigned to the limitations of the common man, Rousseau could either revert to the elitism of previous republican thinkers and place legislative power in the hands of an exceptional and highly trained elite, thus limiting heroic ambition to this elite, or abandon hope for political organisation as a means of enabling men to fulfil their potential. The *Considerations for the Government of Poland* and the dedicatory letter to Geneva in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* favour an elitist model. The belated introduction of the mystic lawgiver in the *Social Contract* and the reliance on this man’s god-like capabilities to hold the conceived state together suggest that Rousseau was already abandoning the ideal of popular sovereignty whilst he was in the very process of exploring how it could function.

Rousseau theoretically empowered the people with sovereignty, and this power would not be repudiated after its enthusiastic proclamation in the French and American revolutions. The fabulously attractive and enduring ideal of democratic equality had engendered a seismic shift in the landscape of political thought. Models of human excellence and fulfilment after Rousseau’s would need to include all men. In the twentieth century, the acceptance of the need for gender equality first proposed

¹⁹ Lippmann, W., *The Phantom Public*, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1925, p. 39.

by Rousseau's near contemporaries, Mary Wollstencraft and Catherine Macaulay, would also necessitate the inclusion of women. Neither Rousseau, nor those who followed, could take away what Rousseau had given by reverting to monarchic or aristocratic models of sovereign power. The elitist model of governance proposed in *The Government of Poland* had no appeal for future generations. Rousseau's failure to reconcile heroic ambition with equality signals the death knell for theoretical models of the heroic state.

The sixth chapter concentrates on Rousseau's individual solution which provides a path for a particularly gifted man to regain his independence and wholeness whilst living in a corrupt society by becoming entirely self-dependent for his self-worth and self-identity. The individual solution, most clearly articulated in *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, is only open to an aristocracy of merit, and in many ways it is a monarchy of merit limited to one man, Rousseau himself. The solution Rousseau offers the individual living in a corrupt society requires a person to strip down to heroism rather than build up to it as Homer and Plato had presumed. Man must reduce himself to his most basic state rather than strive to escape the confines of the human condition. Digging down to one's innate essence is not easier than climbing away from it. In his later autobiographical writings Rousseau offers himself as the model of a man who discovers his essential core and lives by its demands.

Rousseau's individual solution to the problem of society rests on disengaging from society and political organisation. It abandons the notion of political participation as a fundamental requirement for human fulfilment. In doing so, it reverts to heroism as a model for an individual man driven uniquely by self-interest. Rousseau's individual model of heroism provides, like Homer's heroic model, little more than a source of personal aspiration and self-assertion. Homer's heroes live outside of the confines of a state, whilst the isolated hero of Rousseau's late autobiographical writings lives outside of the confines of any human community. I argue that a life of total isolation is not a possible human life. Rousseau's failure to reconcile heroism and equality and his subsequent model of an isolated, non-political, non-communal heroic individual would banish ideals of heroism as conceived by Homer, Plato and Rousseau himself into the fictional realm.

The Layout of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into three parts, the first on Homer, the second on Plato and the third on Rousseau. Each part contains two chapters, one examining the thinker's conception of heroic man and one on their prescriptive conception of the *polis*. The first chapter on Homeric man examines the model of individual excellence proposed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The second chapter argues that there is no conceptual defence of an embryonic *polis* in the epics. Homer did not offer a model for life in a political association. Part two, following on the model of the first part, features a chapter on Plato and Socrates' model of individual excellence, the heroic philosopher. The fourth chapter of the thesis examines how the philosopher is impelled to use his superiority over ordinary men to create and administer an heroic *polis*. The third part, on Rousseau, is equally divided into a chapter on Rousseau's conception of the heroic individual and one on the heroic *polis*. Here, however, the order of the two chapters is reversed. Rousseau's model of political excellence comes first because his attempt to extend heroic participation in political matters to all citizens follows directly from Plato's attempt to conjure an heroic *polis* based on the excellence of an elite class of heroic political rulers. The sixth and last chapter features Rousseau's model of an heroic individual. This last chapter closes the cycle on models of heroic ambition because it proffers a model of action and thought for an individual who lives outside of the political theatre and hence faces the same limitations as Homer's model of individual excellence as an exemplar of the supreme human life.

Finally, the conclusion addresses Nietzsche's hope in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for an overman who could rise above the petty-mindedness and smallness of common man. An engagement with Nietzsche underlines the disappearance of models of heroic achievement within the confines of a *polis* and answers the central question of my conclusion concerning the fate of the heroes. I argue that the *ideal* of creating heroes, as conceived by Homer, Plato and Rousseau, is no longer a driving motivation of the state. The ambition of showing men how to be overwhelmingly excellent in a vast range of activities and human endeavours is one that collapsed with Rousseau's failure to reconcile heroism and equality. Rousseau chose heroism over equality, but history recorded equality as the winner in that particular battle. Nietzsche's overman could not exist with equality or within the confines of common morals and state laws.

The overman cannot exist within a world so strongly marked by Rousseau's appeal to equality. Inevitably it invokes an earlier age. Nietzsche's political ambitions are thus essentially anachronistic.

Heroism has been banished from the state. Humanity's yearning for models of aspiration and emulation, nevertheless, lives on, and my conclusion offers some ideas on who may fill this role.

PART I

HOMER:

The birth of the heroism

CHAPTER 1

Homeric Man: The Hero

In the first works of Western literature, Homer tells the story of great men from a period long past who are unlike “men such as men are now.”¹ The mighty Hector hurls a stone “that two men of the best, as men now are, could hardly avail to lift upon a wagon” (*Il.* XII, 447-8). These legendary men achieve heroic status because they can do things that ordinary men cannot. The contrast between ordinary men and Homer’s warriors extends beyond the strength required to throw big stones. The hero is twice the man the non-hero is in every aspect of life. By telling the tale of astonishing men and calling these men heroes, Homer launched the enduring and seductive dream of heroic achievement. The hero is an image of man as he could be, if only he fulfilled his potential. Homer shows his audience, initially Greek male aristocrats, that, like Hector and the other heroes, they, too, could become grand and noble by performing great deeds. The best of men have the capacity to escape from the dross of humanity and become heroes.

This chapter has three objectives. Firstly, it shows that Homer portrays his heroes as models of emulation. The hero provides a model of unsurpassable excellence to which other men can aspire. Secondly, I demonstrate that Homer’s main protagonists achieve heroic status by obtaining the highest honour open to man, immortal glory. In the Homeric worldview, mortality is the hallmark of the human condition, as man must die whilst everything else in the cosmos lives forever, including animals and plants that are considered as a species that continually reproduce. Performing great deeds that live on in the songs and stories of men who

¹Ajax tosses a stone “that even a strong man in his prime, as men now are, could hardly hold up with both hands” (*Il.* XII, 381-3). Diomedes throws a rock “that two men such as men now are could not carry” (*Il.* V, 302). Aeneas does likewise (*Il.* XX, 285). Even old Nestor lifts with ease a full cup that another man would struggle to move (*Il.* XI, 635-5). Achilles is in fact three times stronger than an ordinary man (*Il.* XIV, 453-6). Cf. Van Wees, H., *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History*, J.C. Gieben, Amsterdam, 1992, n.9. p.315. Following convention, references to the *Iliad* will give the book number in Roman numerals followed by the line numbers, whilst references to the *Odyssey* will give the book number in Arabic numbers. Unless indicated otherwise all quotations from *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are E.V. Rieu’s *Iliad*, Penguin Books, London, 1950; *Odyssey*, rev. Rieu D.C.H., & Jones P.V., Penguin Books, London, 1991. Rieu’s prose translation does not capture the lyric beauty of the epics, but when quoted in small sections it conveys meaning more efficiently than Lattimore’s translations in verse. Lattimore, R., *Iliad*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1951; *Odyssey*, Harper and Row, 1967.

follow provides the heroes with undying fame (*kleos*). *Kleos* is a substitute for immortality for the heroes who cannot transcend the limitations of humanity by becoming physically immortal. The Homeric heroes cannot become gods but they can raise their story to the level of the divine and give humanity a fitting *telos*. The *telos* is an image of man as he could be. Finally, I argue that the only way a man can fulfil his heroic potential and perform feats that live on in human memory and ensure his immortal glory is to live and act unrestrained by doubt. Coordinating thought, speech and action in a manner that is transparent to the actor and those around him allows the hero to act fully. Great deeds can only be achieved in the fullness of action, action that is unqualified, unguarded and unequivocal. Such deeds make men great and confer heroic status.

The Homeric hero is very much the “noble” or “master” spirit Nietzsche would yearn for in his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. The Homeric heroes are reckless, have no patience, act in what may be an ill-considered manner and seek revenge. The heroes, however, never hide or slink around in the shadows. The Homeric heroes always act, and the scale of their acts is so immense that they consider themselves and their peers to be god-like. Yet the Homeric hero can never become a god. Nor does he yearn to be one. Why would he? He is the brightest star on his horizon. He knows himself to be a bold, noble and magnificent man, a shining example to all other men.

Homeric Heroes as models for men

To highlight the grandeur of his heroes, Homer presents them as being distant in time and manners from the ordinary men hearing the stories. The society depicted in the Homeric epics has been seen as a reflection of the Mycenaean Age (c. 1600 BC), the Dark Ages (c. 1000 BC), the *Iliad*'s own time (c. 800 BC), or some combinations of these periods.² All that can be said with certainty is that the men of the Homeric

²Agamemnon, Odysseus, Achilles and the Trojan War itself are legendary or mythical characters and events from the Mycenaean Age, also known as the Bronze Age, dating back to 1600-1200BC. The Trojan war is a fixed myth – the Trojans lose, Achilles kills Hector and so on – but the representation of the events changes in the differing portraits offered by different authors. Thucydides did not doubt the reality of the Trojan War, but did not have much confidence in Homer's reporting of this war as he was, after all, “a poet” prone to exaggeration. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, 1, 10. The view that the epics reflected the social organisation of the Mycenaean Age held sway until Michael Ventris deciphered the Mycenaean tablets – known as Linear B – in 1952. Linear B

epics and the society in which they live is deliberately distanced from the culture of its eighth-century auditors by being set in the distant past. The heroes are men of a different ilk. They use different weapons than Homer's contemporaries, they enter combat individually rather than in phalanx formations, they converse in speeches, and they are intimate with the gods. Whilst distinctly superior to other men, the Homeric heroes are not innately different. The heroes are not from a different species of men and hence can serve as models of emulation for ordinary men. Homer insists that man can be heroic and provides a guide on how he may achieve this status.

The Homeric hero would become a model of higher potential that generations of Greeks would aspire to. The *Iliad*, in particular, was widely read by the Greeks and it was considered to be a textbook for life, in much the same way as the Bible

demonstrated that the level of institutional bureaucracy of the Mycenaean Age far exceeded anything in the Homeric epics. Armed with the evidence of Linear B and the belief that it is not possible to hand down such a long and intricate story orally over a period of at least four hundred years, M. I. Finley's hugely influential work, *The World of Odysseus*, paints a picture of Homeric society as a reflection of the Dark Ages of around 1000BC. Finley, M. I., *The World of Odysseus* [1954], Penguin Books, second ed., 1979. Finley's reconstruction eventually also became out-dated. The current orthodoxy is that whilst the events described in the epics are historically anterior to Homer's lifetime, the social organisation of Homeric society largely reflects the date of the final composition of the text, Archaic Greece of 700-800BC. There is also considerable controversy surrounding the actual composition date. The archaeological evidence, however slim, suggests that Archaic Greece was a time of crisis and transition when the principle of 'one-ruler' was being superseded by the emerging *polis*. For a good overview of this topic from a mixed-period composition position that argues that different elements from different periods are present in the epics, see Scully, S., *Homer and the Scared City*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1990, pp.81-99.

Closely related to the issue of dating Homeric society is the "Homeric Question" which asks whether a man, Homer, ever actually existed and if he did whether he wrote both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. "The Homeric Question" is a long running debate that has its roots in Ancient Greece. It is an attempt to resolve the inconsistencies of plot and action within the Homeric oeuvre. A famous inconsistency is Achilles' explicit denial of any knowledge of a prophecy from his mother informing him that he would die shortly after Hector (*Il.* XVI, 50-51) when he is fully aware of the prophecy and had already told everyone present at the embassy scene of the prophecy (*Il.* IX, 410-415). The Analyst school of thinking has denied that such inconsistencies could exist within the work of a single author, and approach the epics as a collection of different myths from different times compiled by different authors. The Homerists, or Unitarians, on the other hand have approached the epics as poems that had been handed down in oral form and then brought together by a final master poet. For the classic study of the Homerist school of thought consult Whitman, C., *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1958. For a discussion on the Analysts approach see Clay, J. S., *The Wrath of Athene: Gods and Men in the Odyssey*, Princeton University Press, 1983, pp.1-7; Seaford, R., *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994, pp. 144-54; Nagy, G., *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* [1979], revised ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1999; Nagy, G., *Homeric Questions*, University of Texas Press, 1996.

The Homeric scholar who reconstructs Homeric society uniquely based on information contained within the text is on safer ground and avoids the need to place a date on Homeric society altogether.

became in the Christian world.³ In his *Symposium*, Xenophon (c.430-350BC) has Niceratus recount how his father made him memorise the Homeric corpus in order to become a “good man” (*Symp.* 3.5). It is well documented that Alexander the Great identified with Achilles to such an extent that he took a copy of the *Iliad* with him on his eastbound journeys. Niceratus and Alexander viewed the *Iliad*’s heroic model of life as a guide for their own behaviour. The epics were “practical manuals for a gentleman’s life.”⁴ The extent of Homer’s influence as a moral and ethical teacher throughout the Greek world is testified to by the Platonic Socrates when he tells Glaucon:

you meet people who admire Homer as the educator of Greece, and who would say that in social and educational matters we should study him and model our lives on his advice (*Republic* 606e).

The length of Plato’s substantial criticism of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* at the junction of the second and third books of the *Republic* further indicates Homer’s potency as a moral educator. In order to recast Greek ethical and moral frameworks, Plato first had to displace Homer “as the educator of Greece” (*Rep.* 606e).

Homer’s success in forming heroic men who could serve as inspirational models is founded on his extraordinary accomplishment of presenting heroes who are magnificent, but do not transcend human action and thought. The awe the heroes inspire is in such measure that it enables the reader to dream of himself as the hero. There were no Achilles or Hector-like figures in the first audience or any audience thereafter. There were, and still are, however, men who aspire to become Achilles-like. The boundaries of human potential are certainly stretched very far in the epics,

³ Homer stood like a colossus in the centre of the Greek world. Homer’s influence is demonstrated by the extent to which he is quoted by later writers and the number of surviving copies of his work that have been found. The greatest number of Greek papyrus rolls has been found in Egypt where the dry conditions favour their preservation. By 1963, of the 1,596 ancient books that had been discovered in Egypt by or about identifiable authors, nearly one half were either copies of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* or commentaries on them. The *Iliad* outnumbered the *Odyssey* by about three to one. The orator Demosthenes was the next most featured author with 83, followed by Euripides with 77 and Hesiod with 72. Further down the list was Plato with 42 copies and Aristotle with 8. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁴ Hobbs, A., *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p.175.

but the actions and thought of the heroes do not require behaviour that is beyond what is humanly conceivable. The reader can still believe that he might achieve, or at least strive for, the same level of excellence. The heroes were conceived by Homer to show men what they could become and they were understood in this manner by the ancient Greeks.

Odysseus' dog Argus is symbolic of how Homer creates models of excellence that leave the reader in awe, yet which remain, as models, in touch with what is feasible. Argus is the perfect dog. In his prime he would have left any observer "astonished at his speed and power" (*Od.* 17, 313-14). Argus was a marvel at picking up a scent and no game could escape him. When the disguised Odysseus returns, Argus, who has been left to scavenge for his survival on dung heaps for twenty years, recognises his master, wags his tail, drops his head in submission and then dies. Argus' love and loyalty to his master enable him to survive neglect to perform with dignity and nobility his last duty as a dog. In every physical and behavioural aspect, Argus fulfils the full and magnificent potential of a dog but at no point does Argus' excellence depend on actions that transcend the condition of a dog.

Argus certainly stretches the bounds of credulity. The average life expectancy for a large dog is about ten to twelve years. For Argus to survive neglect for over twenty years is highly improbable, but it is not altogether impossible. Whilst Argus is almost too good to be true, he does not cross the line into fantasy where dogs talk and juggle balls. Argus lives to an improbable old age, but he does not display any traits that are strictly impossible for a dog. Were Argus to display traits that are strictly impossible for a dog to achieve, his link to what is feasible would be lost and he could no longer serve as a model of aspiration. Likewise, the Homeric heroes stretch the bounds of what is conceivable, but at no point do they undertake actions that are humanly impossible. Consequently, the heroes are highly efficient as models of aspiration. They reach heights of excellence that are improbable but not impossible and consequently not out of reach of human aspiration. The height of excellence is to perform deeds that live on in the memory of humanity and ensure immortal fame.

Seeking immortal glory and achieving “god-like” status

Homeric man, like all people, seeks something beyond himself and larger than himself in order to distinguish himself within the cosmos in which he lives. The existence of an entity or power beyond the human station provides human life with meaning. Hannah Arendt maintains that every individual life is a story with a beginning and an end, yet the great story of humanity has no end. The history of humanity has many actors, but no authors.⁵ In order to find agency and meaning in the story of humanity, humanity must find a *telos* and an author. The author is usually a God or gods and these same gods or God also provide a *telos* for human life as a model of emulation. This section of my text argues that Homer’s audacious proposal is to offer an image of man as a *telos* and guiding light for humanity. For Homer, the highest level of excellence is human. The Homeric hero is an image of man in the fullness of his grandeur. The hero fulfils human potential and in doing so becomes the most estimable object of his universe. The epics demonstrate that men can gain meaning and purpose from heroes, that is, men who are an idealised portrait of men not unlike themselves in constitution. A reader of the epics could ask himself: what would Achilles do? and then proceed to emulate Achilles. This would not enable the reader to pick up massive stones, but he would, like Achilles and the other heroes, never be incapacitated. He would always be able to act.

The fact that, for Homer, man is the pinnacle of his universe and the most worthy guide and model of emulation to other men is underlined by the exclusion of other possible models of emulation and guides to behaviour, specifically the gods or life after death. Divine excellence or the perfection of an idealised after-life were powerless in offering men as magnificent as the Homeric heroes a model of emulation or the necessary motivation to act in a certain manner. The afterlife held no currency for Homeric man as either an object of yearning or a solace to the miseries of life because the Greeks in general and Homer in particular had a very bleak view of life after death. Upon dying, a person’s soul goes to the Hall of Hades. Odysseus visits the Hall of Hades, the world of the dead, in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. “Dreadful Night spreads her mantle over that unhappy people” (*Od.* 11, 15-19) and

⁵ Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* [1958], The University of Chicago Press, [Second Ed.] intro. Canovan, M., 1998, pp.184-5.

the “dead live on as mindless disembodied ghosts” (11, 475). The afterlife is the prolongation of the moment of death. The dead are “like a shadow or a dream” (11, 207) and are often referred to as shades. The shades momentarily gain consciousness when Odysseus provides them with the offerings he has brought from the world of the living. For the Christian, the afterlife proffers meaning to life on earth because life is a precursor or preparation for something finer and grander that will follow. For Homer, men must seek meaning for life in this earthly life because the afterlife is a bleak void.

Nor does the promise of rewards or punishment in the afterlife offer Homeric man an incentive to live in any particular manner. Ancient and modern attempts have been made to view an embryonic form of post-mortem retributive justice in the underworld of the *Odyssey*, and empower the afterlife with a role in guiding human behaviour and aspirations.⁶ However, these arguments are founded entirely on the exceptionally wicked trio of Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus who suffer “eternal punishment in Hades” (*Gorgias* 525e; *Od.* 11, 575-600). All three committed offences against gods and are put to eternal labour.⁷ It is a mistake to draw general conclusions from these unique examples. The dead, in the Hall of Hades, are not grouped into moral categories. “Although they suffer from the bleakness of their surroundings, their fate has no punitive quality.”⁸ Homeric man cannot seek solace in

⁶ Klonoski asserts “that the underworld is a place of various realms distinguished in part by degrees of darkness. Darker souls suffer more desperately.” Klonoski, R., “The Preservation of Homeric tradition: heroic re-performance in the *Republic* and the *Odyssey*,” *CLIO*, Spring 1993, v.22, n.3, pp.251-272, down-loaded from <http://web7.infotrac>, p.9/19. Socrates on his deathbed tells his companions, “I have a firm hope that there is something in store for those who have died, and (as we have been told since antiquity) something much better for the good than for the wicked” (*Phaedo* 63c). Taylor claims that Socrates is referring to the Orphic and Pythagorean belief of the deathlessness of the soul and its reincarnation in different earthly bodies. Taylor, A., *Plato; The Man and his Work* [1926], University Paper Backs, [Fourth Ed.], London, 1960, p.175. However, in light of Socrates’ similar claims when discussing Odysseus’ trip to the underworld in the *Gorgias* (525e), it is just as likely that the “antiquity” Socrates is referring to is the story of Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus suffering in the Hall of Hades as described by Homer.

⁷ Smyth, H., “Greek Conceptions of Immortality From Homer to Plato,” *Harvard Essays on Classical Subjects* [1912], ed. Smyth, H., Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York, 1968, pp.239-284. Smyth offers a very close textual analysis.

⁸ Bernstein, A., *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian Worlds*, University College London Press, London, 1993, p.26.

the face of death with the hope of a pleasant afterlife in heaven.⁹ For Homer, the superlative existence is human life lived to the fullest on this earth. An idealised portrait of man, a man as hero, is the ultimate aspiration for all men and its pursuit provides human life with meaning.

The Homeric gods are too human-like and too morally flawed to offer Homer's heroes a final aim or meaning for life. Whilst the gods are feared because of their power, they are not beyond mockery or open challenge.¹⁰ Mocking the gods is not an act of hubris because man remains human in status. He does not call himself a god, nor does he seek actual immortality, but he does see himself as qualitatively equivalent to the gods and hence "god-like." The gods are primarily motivated, as are the heroes, by the desire to be paid due respect by mortals and the other gods.¹¹ The gods do not work to any systematic plan when dealing with humans. Throughout the epics the gods sometimes reward proper behaviour and on equally numerous occasions simply aid a man of a higher standing or a favourite who seems to have been chosen arbitrarily.¹² Indeed, Zeus aids Achilles because he is implored to do so by Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, and not because Achilles is particularly pious or morally outstanding. The gods themselves interact with humans as if dealing with equals. They amuse themselves by observing the intrigues and wars of humans,

⁹ The tragic poets largely retain the Homeric view of the after-life. As with Homer himself, there is the hint of punishment after death for evil deeds, but this is never fully developed. Smyth, H., "Greek Conceptions of Immortality From Homer to Plato," *op. cit.*, p.264. Aristophanes' *Frogs* alludes to the horrors rumoured to exist in Hades for those who were wicked on earth, but it is unclear whether Aristophanes advocated these views or, through his satire, opposed them. Berstein, *The Formation of Hell, op. cit.*, p.49. Glaucon "looked at Socrates in astonishment and exclaimed "Good Lord! Do you believe it is?"(608d), when Socrates expresses a belief in the possibility of the immortality of the soul and post-mortem retributive justice (cf. *Phaedo* 63c, *Apology*, 29a-c, 38c-42a). Glaucon's amazement indicates that the average Athenian of his time would be shocked by Socrates' views on the immortality of the soul.

¹⁰ Cf. The wounding of Ares, the war god no less, and Aphrodite by Diomedes and their undignified conduct thereafter (*Il.* V); Hera's base exploitation of her sex-appeal to distract her husband, Zeus (XIV); the crude bullying of Artemis by Hera and the knock-out blow dealt by Athene to Ares in the grotesque brawl of the immortals (*Il.* XXI); and finally the tale of Ares and Aphrodite caught in bed by Hephaestus (*Od.* 8). Camps, W. A., *An Introduction to Homer*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, p.9.

¹¹ Bryant, J. M., *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics*, State University of New York Press, 1996, p.36.

¹² The basic amorality of Homeric gods has been most strongly advocated by Adkins. Adkins, A., *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values*, Oxford University Press, 1960, Reprinted 1970. Adkins' view of the gods is aligned to Socrates, who presented the anthropomorphic nature and moral ambivalence of the Homeric gods as the main reasons for censoring the epics in the ideal society proposed in the *Republic*.

wars that they are not above inflaming or participating in. Zeus, the mightiest of the gods, is a spectator god. As Bespaloff writes, “[u]nlike the God of Israel he does not intervene with punishment or help, revenge or redemption.”¹³

The gods of most nations claim to have created the world. The Olympians make no such claim. ... Do they attend to government? Do they promote agriculture? Do they practise trades and industries? Not a bit of it. Why should they do any honest work? They find it easier to live on the revenues and blast with thunderbolts the people who do not pay. They are conquering chieftains, royal buccaneers. They fight, and feast, and play, and make music; they drink deep, and roar with laughter at the same lame smith who waits on them.¹⁴

Whilst the gods live a life of blithe insouciance, Homer’s heroes achieve levels of greatness that led the ancient critic Longinus to famously comment, “Homer seems in the *Iliad* to have made his men gods and his gods men” (*On the Sublime*, 9.7). The gods, as opposed to the heroes, take no responsibility for their actions. Being immortal, stronger, more powerful and better looking, all of the gods’ achievements are facile and their quarrels frivolous. Book I of the *Iliad* starts with a quarrel between the heroes and ends with a quarrel between the gods. The human quarrel leads to life and death. In contrast, the quarrel between the gods is aimless and trivial and ends with the juvenile mockery of the lame Hephaestus (*Il.* I, 599-600). Through their endurance and effort – which the gods cannot experience – the heroes gain moral dignity, which the gods lack.

The Homeric gods are impotent in providing Homeric man a model of aspiration. Christians can look at the purity and perfection of their God and see an object of greatness and timelessness which can guide their behaviour and place their existence in the context of a larger scheme that effectively gives their lives meaning. “The Greeks,” Edith Hamilton writes “made their gods in their own image.”¹⁵

¹³Bespaloff, R., *On the Iliad* [1947], trans. McCarthy, P., [Second Hardcover Ed.] Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1970, p.77.

¹⁴ Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion*, 1925, p.67, cited in Russell, B., *The History of Western Philosophy and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present* [1946], Allen & Unwin, London, 1957, p.30.

¹⁵ Hamilton, E., *Mythology*, Mentor Books, New York, 1942, p.16.

Previously, and in other cultures, gods had either been beyond representation or distinctly non-earthly. Herodotus reported that the Persians had no images of their gods and believed in an invisible but omnipresent god (*The Histories*, 1. 131). Elsewhere, gods were envisaged in forms that were unlike anything that existed on earth: a woman with a cat's head; a man with an eagle or lion's head, and both with wings; or a monstrous and mysterious sphinx. The fundamental change that allowed the Greeks to present gods in human form was realised because Greek artists and poets, starting with Homer, came to appreciate how noble and grand the human form was. Homer does not explain Helen of Troy's beauty by attributing it to the myth that she was born from an egg, nor does he refer to the story of Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, dipping him in the river Styx, thus making his body invulnerable apart from the heel by which she held him. For Homer, Helen's immaculate beauty and Achilles' excellence are not attributed to supernatural origins because the human form was the final destination in the search for beauty and excellence. Homeric men, unlike Christians, did not need a non-human model of higher potential to emulate, they climbed the highest peaks of excellence and called themselves and their peers 'god-like', the most commonly used adjective for the heroes in the epics.¹⁶

Homer's search for heroism is not founded on man's desire to overcome the physical limitations of the human condition, as we will see later it is for Plato. Rather the aim is to re-conceive those limitations so that man can aim to achieve god-like status, at times even being able to surpass the godly standard, whilst remaining fully human and mortal. Homeric man considers human life as the pinnacle of possible achievement and immortal glory, not retributive justice in the afterlife or godly perfection, as the goal of the human condition.

The defining condition of humanity in the Homeric worldview was mortality. "Immortality means endurance in time, deathless life on this earth and in this world as it was given, according to Greek understanding, to nature and the Olympian gods."¹⁷ The Homeric gods were anthropomorphic deities, in appearance and attitude, who lived forever. Nature was also imbued with immortality because an animal or plant

¹⁶Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, *op. cit.*, p.135.

¹⁷Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, p.18.

did not exist as an individual specimen with a limited life span, but as a member of a species which reproduced continually. The notion of nature being immortal is maintained by later Greeks (Aristotle, *Economics* 1342b). Geographical features such as mountains and rivers secured immortality because they were considered unchanging. Man is the only mortal in an immortal universe. He does not cower before this limitation; he combats it by seeking a substitute for immortality. Man can only share in immortality by creating something immortal.¹⁸ He may leave his name on a monument that lasts forever, or write a poem which ensures his undying fame. What Homeric man creates is his life story – the story of his deeds assure him of *kleos*, everlasting fame and immortal glory.

And for Homer's warriors, glory is not some vain illusion or empty boast, it is the same thing that Christians saw in Redemption, a promise of immortality outside and beyond history.¹⁹

The heroes of the Homeric epics can never achieve physical immortality. Odysseus is offered immortality by the Nymph Calypso so that they both may eternally share her island, Ogygia.²⁰ Vernant argues that the reason Odysseus rejects the offer can be found in Calypso's name. Calypso is derived from the verb *kaluptein*, to hide. She is the hidden one, but also the one who hides. She is the Concealer. Odysseus cannot accept immortality hidden on Calypso's island because it would entail "a renunciation of his career as an epic hero."²¹ Immortality concealed on Ogygia would see the memory of Odysseus in other men's minds fade into obscurity. Odysseus would be forgotten and hence would not secure his primary aim in life – immortal fame – despite securing actual immortality. As Vernant explains:

¹⁸ Arendt claimed that the major difference between the pre-Socratic Greeks and the post-Socratic Greeks was that the former sought immortality whilst the latter sought eternity. *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, pp.17-21. Whilst immortality is deathlessness, eternity is essentially timelessness.

¹⁹ Bernaloff, *On the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p.46.

²⁰ (*Od.*, 5, 137, 209; 7, 257-8) Why Odysseus rejects this offer is a question that is relatively ignored in Homeric studies. Two exceptions are Nelson, S., "Calypso's Choice: Immortality and Heroic Striving in the *Odyssey* and *Ulysses*," *Literary Imagination, Ancient and Modern: Essays in Honour of David Grene*, [Ed. Breyfogle, T.] The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999, pp.63-89; and Vernant, J-P., "The Refusal of Odysseus," *Reading the Odyssey: Selective Interpretive Essays*, trans. Fargena, V. & ed. Schein, S., Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, pp. 185-9.

²¹ Vernant, J-P., "The Refusal of Odysseus," *op. cit.*, p.188.

Were he no longer to figure as a model of endurance in a text ... he would have to allow his memory to be erased in the minds of humans and his posthumous fame to be taken from him; and though still alive, he would have to allow himself to sink into the depths of oblivion.²²

Odysseus had been entrapped on Ogygia for seven years, and he is desperately unhappy and wants to return to his wife and his homeland. Odysseus does not, however, frame his return in terms of his obligations to his homeland and wife, but rather is driven by his personal interests which demand that he reclaim his eminent position amongst humans in order to secure his place in the collective memory of humanity. Odysseus had previously spent a year with the witch, Circe, happily sharing her bed as he does with Calypso. Odysseus only leaves Circe when his men admonish him for forgetting his homeland, Ithaca (*Od.* 10, 470-5).

In the *Odyssey*, Phemius, the bard, sings ballads “about the deeds [stories] of men or gods” (*Od.* 1, 338). The bard does not sing of the stories of men and the stories of gods because gods and men are characters in the same stories. The Homeric hero raises his story to the point where it becomes the equivalent of the immortal god, whilst the hero himself remains mortal. Indeed, the fact that the Homeric epics are still read today shows how remarkably successful the Homeric heroes were in the aim of achieving immortal fame even if actual immortality is denied to them.

The interaction between gods and men is the starkest evidence of the raising of the human standard and the humanising of the godly standard. The best of men engage personally with their gods. The very best of men make love with their goddesses and many are descended from gods. Despite this seemingly promiscuous interaction between men and the gods, the line between mortal and immortal is always clear. Man is mortal and gods are immortal. A man born from a god does not inherit immortality. Immortality is not a quality that can exist in degrees – one either lives forever or dies – and the very notion of a demi-god cannot exist in the Homeric

²² *Ibid.* The gods enjoy actual immortality as well as the immortality provided by their presence in the text.

framework because it would imply a semi-immortality, which is clearly an impossible state of being. Achilles, despite being born to a goddess, is not a demi-god because immortality, the one true mark of divinity, eludes him. Achilles' divine origin contributes to his lustre, but it is not the main source of his heroic status. Sarpedon, Zeus' son, has far more illustrious origins than Achilles, yet he remains a fairly minor hero. Not all heroes are equal, and in the *Iliad* it is Achilles' star which burns brightest. The story of the *Iliad* is primarily the story of the deeds of Achilles, and hence Achilles' immortal fame exceeds that of the other heroes.

The heroes' proximity to the gods and Homer's frequent distinctions between his heroes and "men as men are now" has led to speculation that Homer's heroes were not fully human, but legendary men from a "distinct, extinct, and semi-divine race."²³ A so-called "fourth race" that existed between mortal humans and the gods and is explicitly described by Hesiod in *Works and Days*:

Yet again another race, the fourth race upon the fertile soil,
Zeus son of Kronos made: more just and better, A godlike race of
men, of heroes, known as Demigods (157-160).

This fourth race became embroiled in wars at Thebes and Troy where many died and the rest were given a living place by Zeus away from men "at the ends of the earth" (161-168). Nietzsche considered that Hesiod needed to distance the Homeric heroes from men because he had "no other way to deal with the contradiction presented by the magnificent, but equally horrific and violent Homeric world."²⁴

To view Homer's heroes as super-natural men from a fourth race devalues their achievements and renders them impotent as models of emulation for other humans. If the heroes are literally "not men as men are now," the enormity of their deeds is reduced because they are preformed by super-human men and cannot be replicated by other men. On the other hand, if Homer's heroes are special men but nonetheless men as men even today could be, as Rieu claims, "the poetic achievement

²³Van Wees, *Status Warriors*, *op. cit.*, pp.5-8, the quotation is from p.8.

²⁴Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, *op. cit.*, p.27.

in raising them to the tragic level was all the more sublime.”²⁵ The modern *Rambo*-style action movie can help to clarify Rieu’s argument. The hero in these movies will repeatedly act in a way that is highly improbable. Even the luckiest and most able soldier is unlikely to single-handedly take on an entire army and come away unscathed. Here the audience does not conclude that the hero of such a movie is an alien from a previous, long-lost generation of ten-foot tall warriors. The Rambo-type hero is, like Hector or Argus the dog, a fictitious embellishment of what is plausibly conceivable. Indeed, the Rambo character was based on Audie Murphy, the most decorated American soldier of the Second World War. Murphy won the Medal of Honor for single-handedly taking on a German infantry company.²⁶ Whilst Murphy’s bravery is unquestioned, he himself would just fail to qualify as a hero under the definition used in this thesis because he committed an heroic act, but did not do so on a consistent basis. Nonetheless, Murphy demonstrates the possibility of heroism. Both Rambo and the Homeric hero inhabit a world that is improbable, but neither exceeds the humanly possible. They are not demi-gods.

Everything in Homer’s work is immaculate, and uniform perfection of Homeric man’s environment serves to make his perfection more feasible. Dawn always rises fresh and rosy fingered, all the manufactured products are beautiful and well-built. Homer, Rieu argues, is not under the illusion that everything in the “Mycenaean Age” was faultless, but he is seeing things as they could be:

He has no use for a shoddy article, what he sees in his mind’s eye is the perfect thing. He does the same with people. ... [T]he reality he sees has for his eye a certain transparence, through which he sees and records the ideal or higher reality. ... It is though that he had anticipated Plato’s Theory of Forms, according to which all earthly things are the imperfect and transitory copies of ideal Forms that have a permanent existence in Heaven.²⁷

²⁵Rieu, V. R., “Introduction,” *Iliad*, Penguin, London, 1950, p.xvi.

²⁶Grossman, Lieutenant Colonel, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Little, Brown and Co., Boston, 1995, p.155.

²⁷Rieu, *op. cit.*, p.xx.

In Homer's pre-Platonic theory of Forms, the perfect exemplar of all things exists, not in Heaven, as Rieu claims, but here on this earth. As the only mortal in an immortal landscape, and devoid of any higher models of guidance or aspiration, Homeric man had no option but to place himself and the world he lived in at the pinnacle of what may be achieved. Homeric man painted an idealised self-portrait and placed this portrait at the peak of achievement and excellence. Readers may never achieve the full heroism in the sense of Achilles or Hector, but they can aim to emulate these heroes.

The Homeric hero asserts himself through his action. He possesses a self-contained "master" or "noble" morality that "grows from a triumphant affirmation of itself" and celebrates its existence. The Homeric hero is the opposite of the common man who is inflicted with a "slave" morality that needs "external stimuli in order to act – its action is fundamentally reaction."²⁸ The Homeric hero is, for Nietzsche, a "noble" man and "[t]he noble man lives for himself in trust and openness."²⁹ The Homeric hero is perhaps naïve and he certainly knows human weakness because he is very human, but he is a celebration of the best humanity has to offer.

Who is the hero? Preconditions for heroism

The heroes in the epics are categorically human. Yet, very few humans are heroes. There are gender and class restrictions to heroism. Specifically, only a male aristocrat can be a hero.

Aristocratic heroes

The heroes are warrior princes (*basileus*). They struggle against the environmental elements, the background of war and each other in order to gain honour. Any reader of the *Iliad* will notice that it is only princes who are effective in battle. The feats of common soldiers on the battlefield are simply not mentioned in the epics. Some commentators have struggled to explain this anomaly by pointing out that the princes, like medieval knights, had the necessary means to equip themselves adequately in battle, and in times of peace had the wealth and leisure to train for battle. The princes,

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, *op. cit.*, p.22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24.

presumably, also had a superior diet to common men making them bigger and stronger.³⁰ Such factors would admittedly make the princes more efficient warriors; but to deny, by ignoring, the contributions of the common soldiers and to display the fortunes of one high-born man as pivotal to the tide of battle is subordinating reality to literary effect and the dictates of ideology. The ideology of the Homeric epics is one that confines superlative human achievement to male aristocrats.

The aristocratic component of the Homeric oeuvre, especially the *Iliad*, cannot be overstated. Supreme human action, heroism, would continue to be limited to an aristocracy – either hereditary or based on merit – until Rousseau attempted to extend ideals of heroism to all citizens in the *Social Contract*. Notions of superior human action are by their very nature hierarchical, and Homer is unapologetic in stressing the superiority of the hero over ordinary men in both his ability to perform deeds and in his intrinsic worth. For Homer, all men are not created equal, some are better than others by birthright. Of those born into nobility, some extend their superiority further still and become heroic. A prince is born into an honourable status, a hero gains subsequent honour according to the life he leads.

It is an inescapable fact of the *Iliad* that gaining and ensuring honour is the primary consideration of the Homeric hero. The Greek expedition to Troy was ostensibly mounted to retrieve Helen, Menelaus' wife, in order to regain his honour. The honour of Menelaus' brother, Agamemnon, who is the Greek Commander-in-Chief, and the honour of Greeks generally is also at stake through kin and national relations. The Greek king, Agamemnon, takes Achilles' war prize, the girl Briseis, to reaffirm that he is the most powerful and honourable of the two men. Achilles' extreme reaction is based on honour, as he refutes Agamemnon's claim to superiority. The sum of one's honour is known as *timē*. *Timē* is usually translated as honour, but *timē* and honour are not strictly equivalent. *Timē* is allocated rather than won and as

³⁰For example Adkins, A., *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* [1960], Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 33; and Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece*, *op. cit.*, p.28. The analogy with medieval knights falls down because unlike the knight, the Homeric prince did not devote himself uniquely to warfare and preparation for warfare. The princes more closely resembled gentlemen farmers, they tended to land, built homes etc.

such is closer in meaning to status.³¹ The first component of *timē* was noble birth. Performing deeds and behaving in a socially acceptable manner ensure subsequent honour. Every hero in the Homeric oeuvre is a prince (*basileus*), a local ruler or the son of a ruler, never a brave common soldier. Whilst there is plenty of evidence of heroes falling from nobility, usually the result of defeat in war, no one can rise to the ranks of nobility and hence heroism through merit. Contrary to claims that the poems were not a defence of a hereditary hierarchy,³² there is no doubt that nobility of birth was an essential criterion to becoming a hero.

The only non-aristocratic voice heard in the *Iliad* is that of the habitual heckler Thersites (*Il. II*, 211-277). Thersites is either a common man or from the very low nobility. Thersites interjects in an assembly and paraphrases Achilles' accusation of Book I that Agamemnon's huts are full of bronze and women that have largely come from the efforts of others, yet his greed is still not satisfied. Whilst it is reasonable for Achilles to claim that he wins the battles only for Agamemnon to take all the glory and booty, the same complaint coming from Thersites is presented as grotesque and accentuates his false pretensions. Thersites' complaint is never answered. He is simply threatened and then bashed with the sceptre by Odysseus. The assembled troops find Odysseus' bashing of Thersites highly amusing.

The rest, disgruntled as they were, had a good laugh at his [Thersites'] expense. "Good work!" cried one man, catching the eye of his neighbour and saying what they were all feeling. "There's many a fine thing to Odysseus' credit, what with the sound schemes he has put forward and his leadership in battle. But he has never done us a better turn than when he stopped the mouth of this windy ranter" (*Il. II*, 271-77).

Thersites has no right to think of himself as an equal with the "god-like" Odysseus and the other princes. The Thersites episode has generally been read as a reaffirmation of the aristocracy's monopoly on power.³³ Whether the text is

³¹Finkelberg, M., "Timē and Aretē in Homer," *The Classical Quarterly*, XLVII:1, January 1998, pp.14-28, p.16.

³²See Kirk, G. S., *The Songs of Homer*, Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp.274-81, and Scully, S., *Homer and the Scared City*, Cornell University Press, 1990, p.98.

³³Scholars have reacted to the scene according to their own political beliefs. Peter Rose concluded that

successful in convincing the reader or auditor of this is another issue. It may well be successful to an ancient Greek who sees in Thersites' complaint a desire to avoid his manly duty and escape the battle scene. It may also be successful for the aristocrat who sees Thersites' crime as his audacity in standing up to the king. For the modern democrat, however, Thersites' complaint is reasonable, and it is equally reasonable whether it is made by Thersites or Achilles. The scene would appear to reaffirm aristocratic power for Homer's near contemporaries, but for the modern reader it fails to achieve its objectives.

The claim that of all Odysseus' achievements beating the hapless Thersites is the greatest appears ridiculous and has been seen as ironic, indicating that in the common man's opinion Odysseus has never done much of any real value.³⁴ Irony in the sense of sarcasm, however, is not in the repertoire of Homeric man who is too straightforward and blunt to engage in the *double entendre* demanded by irony. The extravagant praise of Odysseus can only be explained in terms of literary exaggeration used to reinforce the inappropriateness of Thersites' audacity.³⁵

The ferocity with which Thersites is treated underlines the princes' exclusive grasp on heroism. Thersites has no claim to equality with the heroes. He does not even look like a hero. Thersites' physical description occupies four lines, which is a great deal by the standards of the *Iliad* and Greek tragedy generally. The noble norm is usually a single adjective such as "god-like," "fair-haired," "deep-girdled". Thersites' description culminates in the claim that he is "the ugliest man that had come to Ilium" (*Il. II*, 251-255). The Greek tendency to correlate internal and external appearance emphasises the inappropriate nature of Thersites' interjection. Thersites' "shrill voice" (222) excludes him from sounding like a hero, and in a world where honour is heaped upon a man for his actions, this "windy ranter" (321) who sits

"class warfare is alive and well in the little read pages of classical scholarship." Rose, P., "Thersites' and the plural voices of Homer," *Arethusa*, 21(1), Spring 1988, pp.5-26, p.11.

³⁴Thalmann, W., "Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 118, 1988, pp.1-28, p.21.

³⁵Jasper Griffin has made the convincing point that Odysseus is demonstrating "how to be a king". Odysseus has achieved what is beyond Agamemnon: he has commanded discipline and lifted, somehow, the morale of the troops. Griffin, J., *Homer on Life and Death*, Oxford University Press, 1980, p.10.

down terrified and helpless when beaten by Odysseus certainly does not act like a hero.

Male heroes

Homer's definition of excellence is uniquely open to men. One could only be *agathos* (excellent) if one were a warrior, and a woman could not be a warrior. Women are excluded from heroism, but are, like men, subjected to a standard of judgement. It was neither expected nor desired that females should display heroic qualities. The world of the hero is masculine: it is the battlefield and the assembly.³⁶ The female is confined to the city. However, unlike the strict adherence to these gender divisions in Aristotle, there is some crossover between the two spheres in Homer.³⁷ The female in Homeric society is claimed as a prize of war and, whether free or a captive, is enchained to domestic duties. Homer, nonetheless, accords his women a greater scope of importance and a broader range of activities than did most of the male thinkers who followed him.

The cause of the Trojan War is indicative of the Homeric attitude to women. Ostensibly, the war between the Greeks and Trojans is the result of Helen leaving her Greek husband, Menelaus, to be with the Trojan, Paris. Helen shows a level of liberty and control over her own life and chooses the man with whom she wants to be. It could be possible to read the *Iliad* as reinforcing an ideology of the subordination of woman by showing a woman with too much liberty causing havoc amongst men. Yet this is not the impression suggested by the text. As Postlethwaite observes, "none of the characters in the poem condemns her [Helen] as she condemns herself."³⁸ Helen has never heard a harsh word against her from Hector, the Trojan Prince, who stands to lose his life, his family and his city (*Il.* XXIV, 767). Priam, Hector's father

³⁶ Scully argues that Hector cannot stay within the city in Book Six of the *Iliad* "without regressing into a nascent male" because it would be akin to a warrior returning to the womb. Scully, *Homer and the Sacred City*, *op. cit.*, p.66.

³⁷ Nortwick, T., "Like a Woman: Hector and the Boundaries of Masculinity," *Arethusa*, 34 (2), 2001, 221-35, pp. 225-6.

³⁸ Postlethwaite, N., *Homer's Iliad: A Commentary on the translation of Richard Lattimore*, University of Exeter Press, 2000, pp.105-6. Not all modern scholars have been as forgiving as the Trojans. Ryan judged her as "nothing but a flirt and professional charmer," and "wanton, self-centered, deceitful, bewitching and beguiling." Ryan, G. J., "Helen in Homer," *Classical Journal*, 61, 1965, p.117, cited in Postlethwaite, *Homer's Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p.105.

and ruler of Troy, explicitly absolves Helen of any blame (*Il.* III, 164). Agamemnon and Achilles' quarrel is caused by the trading of a woman as a commodity.³⁹ When Agamemnon returns his war concubine, Chryseis, to her father to bring an end to the plague sent by Apollo among the Greek soldiers he demands Achilles' war prize Briseis as a replacement. Whilst Achilles shows a genuine affection for Briseis, his main grievance is not that he has lost his loved one, but that Agamemnon is being disrespectful by dispossessing him of what he gained through his war effort. The quarrel would have eventuated whatever material possession Agamemnon had claimed from Achilles. It should be noted that both Briseis and Chryseis are slaves, and the condition of slavery may well override one's gender in determining status in the Homeric epics.⁴⁰ The *Iliad* revolves around two conflicts: one centred on a woman (Helen) with strong will and personal liberty, and the other centred on a woman (Briseis) traded as a commodity by men. This contradictory treatment of women in the text is indicative of the fluid role of women and more broadly the inequality of human beings in Homer's epics.

The ideal female of the Homeric epics is Odysseus' wife, Penelope. Penelope is praised for her "skill in handicraft, her excellent brain, and that genius she has for getting her own way" (*Od.* 2, 117-119). Penelope's genius for getting her own way is an admired quality because her way is what Odysseus would want. Likewise, Penelope's "excellent brain," that is, her ability to reason and outwit others, is qualified in so far as it is applied to the benefit of the men folk in her life.⁴¹ Penelope is also beautiful and above all she is faithful to her husband. The Homeric female is one who looks after the house, devotes herself to the men folk in her life and loyally resists the advances of other men. The Homeric wife, however, had more liberty to

³⁹ Gottschall claims that the competition between heroes in the *Iliad* has more to do with gaining access to women than gaining immortal glory. Gottschall, J., "Homer's Human Animal: Ritual Combat in the *Iliad*", *Philosophy and Literature*, 25(2), 2001, pp.278-294, p. 290.

⁴⁰ The value of a woman as a material possession is equally well captured by the prizes offered by Achilles at Patroclus' funeral games. The second prize for the third event, the all in wrestling, is "a woman thoroughly trained in domestic work, who was valued at four oxen in the camp" (XXIII 704-5). These women offered as prizes were slaves too. Aristotle boasted that the Greeks, unlike the Persians, distinguished between wives and slaves (*Politics* I.ii, 1252b).

⁴¹ In the Hall of Hades Odysseus meets a group of women, all of whom were wives or daughters of princes. These women are important because of their relations to men, their divine lovers, their husbands or their children (*Od.* 11, 235-270).

interact with men and influence public matters than her Athenian counterpart.⁴² The role that Arete, the Phaeacian King Alcinous' wife, plays in the running of public affairs would be unimaginable in Athens. She acts as a go-between for those wishing to deal with her husband (*Od.* 6, 303-315), and her wisdom is so renowned that "when her sympathies are enlisted she settles even men's disputes" (*Od.* 7, 73-77). Whilst Arete's position is unusual enough to draw the narrator's attention, it is not seen as bad or inappropriate, and Alcinous is not seen in a lesser light for allowing himself to be 'hen-pecked.' Hecabe, Priam's wife, criticises her husband's public plans to retrieve Hector's corpse (*Il.* XXIV, 200-205). In their famous dialogue of Book Six of the *Iliad*, Andromache gives Hector strategic advice, suggesting he cluster his troops "by the fig tree" in a defensive position (*Il.* VI, 413-39). Hector listens to his wife, but rejects this advice and tells her to go back to the loom. Helen does not fear mocking Paris after his defeats in single combat, when one could expect her to comfort him (*Il.* III, 428-436; VI, 350-353). Penelope maintains Odysseus' seat of power and privilege in Ithaca warm for twenty years in anticipation of his return.⁴³ Penelope offers a female standard of emulation and could on certain criteria be considered a heroine, but because of her gender she is excluded from the main Homeric criterion of heroism, and consequently the main function of the hero, that is to say, the exercise of martial prowess.

In comparison to Homeric gender relations, Athenian democracy might even be said to have robbed some women, those of the aristocratic classes, of the influence they may have previously exerted through their husbands. Democracy transferred power from one or the few to the collective, and consequently in a democracy "there were no thrones from behind which a woman could rule."⁴⁴

Whilst women are excluded from the model of heroism, there is paradoxically no need for the male heroes to purge themselves of any perceived female traits in the epics, especially in the more masculine of the two, the *Iliad*. Contemptuous

⁴² Woronoff, M., "La femme dans l'univers épique (*Iliade*)," *La femme dans les sociétés antiques*, Actes des colloques de Strasbourg (mai 1980 et mars 1981), ed. Lévy, E., Strasbourg, 1983, pp.33- 44.

⁴³ On the methods Penelope uses to maintain control of Ithaca see Chaston, C., "Three Models of Authority in the *Odyssey*," *Classical World*, 96(1), Fall 2002, pp.3-20.

⁴⁴ Just, R., *Women in Athenian law and life*, Routledge, London, 1989, p.22, cited in Blundell, p.128.

references to warriors behaving like women are not common. Whilst battle is raging, Hector finds Paris in his bedroom polishing his armour. Hector admonishes Paris and calls him “a disgrace”, but he never questions his manliness (*Il.* VI, 321-331, 520-9). Indeed, Homeric man cries frequently and easily. The weeping and emotional theatrics of the Homeric hero sit uncomfortably with the modern image that real men do not betray themselves with emotional displays. Modern audiences consider that big boys are not meant to cry and run to their mummies when the going gets tough, but Homer does not. Achilles seeks help from his mother when Agamemnon takes away his war-bride, Briseis, and he is not considered a lesser man for doing so (*Il.* I, 345ff). For Homer, extroverted displays of grief were considered perfectly appropriate for men. It is true that there are reasons given for not crying: it lowers the festive atmosphere at feasts, or it may interfere with the completion of urgent business at hand, but as Van Wees notes with a hint of surprise “[t]he one reason for not crying that is never given is that it is *unmanly*.”⁴⁵

Extreme displays of grief are found in spontaneous reactions to other cases of personal loss. On hearing of Patroclus’ death, Achilles rolls on the ground and pulls out his hair, and bystanders worry that he might kill himself (*Il.* XVIII, 22-7). Menelaus and Odysseus are reduced to rolling in the sand in a suicidal state, one at the thought of losing his brother, the other despairing that he will never get home (*Od.* 4, 539-40; 10, 496-9). Priam not only wails and pulls his hair out when his son Hector dies, he spends days in the courtyard smearing himself with cow dung (*Il.* XXII, 414). We can understand Achilles’ grief at losing his closest companion, Patroclus, or Odysseus and his men crying when their companions are torn apart by the Cyclops; yet we are amazed to find military leaders crying and wailing openly on the battle field and in assemblies when danger is near. Agamemnon addresses his men “shedding tears like a well of dark water” (*Il.* IX, 14-5). Odysseus and his crew are perpetually in tears; Odysseus is in fact in tears as he recounts the tears shed on his journey to the royal court at the Phaeacian feast (*Od.* 7). Modern translations of Homer have often blunted and distorted the effect of Homer’s weeping heroes by

⁴⁵ Van Wees, H., “A Brief History of Tears,” *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity*, Eds. L. Foxhall, & J. Salmon, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp.10-53, p.14.

applying contemporary ideals of propriety on Homer. *Stenakh(iz)ein* is usually translated as “groan” when it refers to the sound wounded men make, but as “wail” when referring to lamenting women.⁴⁶

Impulsiveness and excessive emotional displays are not linked to the female sex because no one in the world depicted by Homer, much less one entire sex, can be considered rational where rationality is understood in a Socratic sense of the mind controlling emotive impulses and man conquering nature. In a chaotic and infinite universe that he cannot explain, the Homeric hero seeks meaning and self-justification in nature. Homeric man reacts instinctively to nature because he sees himself as a part of nature, “on a par with other objects, [he] had no consciousness of himself as a being with causal efficacy within a world of objects.”⁴⁷ For Homer, the universe is an infinite chaos, and reason is powerless to find truth amongst chaos. A type of imagery that was popular to explain the Homeric view of the universe in the 1950s and 60s was the notion of the infinite galaxies that extend timelessly beyond our planet.⁴⁸ Humanity was sending objects and people into space, but how could humanity as a whole, and to an even greater extent the individual, hope to make sense of the infinite unknown of boundless universes. The world was just a speck in a timeless and boundless void that contained all existence; the individual was just a ‘micro-speck’ on the earthly speck. Homeric man was in a similar position *vis à vis* his understanding of the world around him and his place in it. In such a world, interpreting the flight path of a bird as an omen from a god is a perfectly appropriate explanation for what is happening and what will happen. In such a world man does not question his motives or suppress his emotions, he simply follows them. Crying is an action that follows immediately from an emotive state and, for Homer, it should be displayed for all to see. Homer cannot link or confine irrationality, again understood as reason over emotion, to the female sex because he lives in an irrational universe. Consequently there is no need for the male hero to purge supposedly female traits from his character because “female traits” have yet to be established. Showing

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁴⁷ Elshtain, J. B., *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* [1981], [Second Edition] Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993, 13.

⁴⁸ *Cf.* Finley, J. Jr., *Four Stages of Greek Thought*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1966, p.104.

emotions, for Homer, is a form of action, not an irrational feminine act as it would come to be understood by Plato.

A guide to heroism: transparency of thought, speech and action

Homer's model of heroism is presented in the form of two poems about the mythical events and characters of the Trojan war. These poems were both intended and read as guide for human behaviour. The rest of this chapter is devoted to extracting Homer's normative doctrine of heroism from the epics. Homer's doctrine is one that praises action. For Homer, a man will maintain his ability to act at all times and in any circumstances once he establishes an internal consistency of emotions, thought, speech and action. When this unity is established he will be transparent to himself and those around him.

Homeric man is visceral and emotive. In essence, Plato wanted to censor the epics in his proposed ideal Republic because the Homeric heroes and gods were presented as irrational and impulsive. The hero's emotions are primal and they dominate his thought processes, but this does not entail irrationality. Homeric man feels, then rationalises his emotions and says to himself and those around him what he thinks, and, finally, does what he says. This may make him impulsive, but certainly not irrational as Plato would claim. It is this transparency of emotion, thought, speech and action that empowers the Homeric hero to reach his great heights and become a model of aspiration for his fellow men. The pedagogical intent of the *Iliad* is that readers must emulate this transparency in order to become, in turn, heroic themselves.

Hannah Arendt claims that speech is a form of action because to act is "to begin ... to set something in motion"⁴⁹ and nothing can be set in motion without men first interacting with one another by speech. But the beginning for Homeric man is not speech. First comes the inner action of emotion which, when experienced as feeling is rationalised, verbalised and then enacted. Emotions, therefore, are on a par with both speech and action. All human action is "set in motion" by an emotion or feeling.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, p.177.

The equal importance of words and actions is captured in the commission with which Achilles' father, Peleus, sent Phoenix as Achilles' guardian to Troy. Phoenix, in the embassy scene, reminds Achilles:

You were a mere lad, with no experience of the hazards of war, nor of debate, where people make their mark. It was to teach you all these things, to make a speaker of you and a man of action, that he [Peleus] sent me with you (*Il.* IX, 477-480).

The literal translation of speaker and man of action is “the doer of deeds and the speaker of words.”⁵⁰ Phoenix displays no bias towards either ‘a speaker’ or ‘a man of action’ because the two cannot be separated. Words, for Homeric man, are stinging insults and rebuttals which injure and wound. Great words can win a man glory, just as great deeds can, because the word is a deed. The heroes approach the assembly as a place “where men win glory” (*Il.* I, 490). The court scene on Achilles' shield shows that this competition is actually ratified by a prize to whomever offers the best decision (*Il.* XVIII, 510).

On the development of Shakespearian tragedy from the solid work of *Henry V* to the emerging brilliance of *Julius Ceasar*, Hubler noted that “[w]hat matters now is not so much what a man *does* but what he *is*.”⁵¹ The Shakespearian tragedy centres on a man's internal struggle that effects a profound change of character, in consequence of which a gap is opened between what a man is and what he does: MacBeth is a good man who, blinded by ambition, acts badly. For Homer, what a man does and what he is is essentially the same. Redfield, following Herman Fränkel, argues that in the *Iliad* men are the product of their environment and act in a socially conditioned manner. This is not to say that Homeric man lacks intelligence or the means of reflection and forward planning. He is “both impulsive and lucidly

⁵⁰ Cf. The last four lines of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1350-4) “But great words, counteracting the great blows of the over proud bring understanding in old age.” Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, p.25.

⁵¹ Hubler, E., “Introduction” *Hamlet*, Signet Classic, New York, 1963, p. xxvi. Italics are in the original.

reflective.”⁵² This paradox is possible because his passions and motivations are turned outward rather than inward. He projects outwards “to objectify what we now understand as an inner, subjective dynamic.”⁵³ Thus Homeric man does not become depressed or confused, but rather angry at someone or grief-stricken by something, and he articulates these passions to himself and those around him.⁵⁴ A man who, like the Homeric hero, can articulate his desire will always be empowered to act. It is this ability to act that transforms men into heroes.

Homeric man “spoke about feelings as if they were a kind of knowledge.”⁵⁵ Emotions and feelings were objective and quantifiable and they carried the same weight of reality as speech or action. Homeric man does not use words to hide his emotions or motivations, or veil his intentions. His speech (words) expresses his emotional knowledge and conveys his intentions without duplicity or restraint. He says what he thinks and he will do and does as he says. Unlike a Shakespearian character, he has no secret motivations or hidden recesses in his character. Achilles is prone to anger, but this is known by all. Indeed, his father’s final piece of advice was for him to try to keep his anger in check by seeking reconciliation rather than maintaining his rage (*Il. IX*, 255-6). Achilles is meant to attempt to moderate his anger and find alternative solutions to rage, but not hide his anger from others. Achilles is transparent to himself and to those around him.

Homeric man’s transparency can be confused with irrationality and a lack of self-control. Plato certainly understood Homer’s heroes and gods this way and consequently wished to ban the epics from his Republic (*Rep.* 388-391). Achilles’ response to Agamemnon’s threat to take Briseis is presented as the classic example of Homeric man’s irrationality. Achilles feels slighted and wants immediate vengeance by killing Agamemnon on the spot, and his first reaction is to draw his sword in order to do so. To draw his sword may be an extreme reaction, but it is not incontinent. It

⁵²Redfield, J., *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, p.21.

⁵³Nortwick, T., “Like a Woman: Hector and the Boundaries of Masculinity,” *op. cit.*, p.239.

⁵⁴Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p.21.

⁵⁵Lawrence, S., “Self-Control in Homeric Deliberations,” *Prudentia*, 34,1, 2002, pp.1-15, p.2.

is an action consistent with his emotive response – anger – which concurs with his cerebral response – a desire for vengeance. Athene intervenes to restrain Achilles. Whether Athene’s intervention should be seen literally or as an embodiment of Achilles’ better judgment is a matter of conjecture that can never be resolved. Athene intervenes and Achilles yields to her advice, despite disagreeing with it, because he recognises that “if any man obeys the gods, they are more inclined to listen to him” (*Il. I*, 218). Lawrence writes: “Achilles is unlikely to have practised self-control without the overwhelming persuasive pressure of the goddess.”⁵⁶ To see Achilles’ reaction as a lack of self control is to accept Plato’s mind-body dualism where in this case the mind fails to override the emotive desires. Homeric man is unitary in so far as his “rational thought” is a rationalisation of his emotions. Athene’s intervention, whether it is Achilles’ second thoughts or the divine force, changes the situation and demands a new response. Restrained by Athene, Achilles expresses his emotion verbally rather than physically, calling Agamemnon “a drunken sot, with the eyes of a dog and the courage of a doe” (*Il. I*, 225). Achilles does not hide or overcome his anger, he keeps it in check.

Homeric man’s transparency of character is enormously empowering for the individual. Such a character can never be helpless, nor can he be indecisive. There is always a solution or a way forward, because everything is seen in an instrumental, almost mechanical, fashion. Such a man could never reach the total despair and helplessness of King Lear’s famous line upon the realisation of the damage his folly has caused: “Never, never, never, never, never” (V, iii). When forced to make a decision between two practical paths of action, Homeric man will hold a brief internal dialogue to evaluate the difficulties and advantages of each path of action before coming to a resolution.⁵⁷ Lawrence provides numerous examples of *Iliadic* internal deliberations.⁵⁸ When Odysseus finds himself alone to face a Trojan onslaught (*Il. XI*, 401–11), he debates whether to succumb to his fear and flee in disgrace or face the enemies. After briefly canvassing the options, he says to himself “yet still, why

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Romilly de, J., “Les hésitations d’Agamemnon,” *Tragédies grecques au fil des ans*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 1995, pp.11-27, p.13.

⁵⁸ Lawrence, “Self-Control in Homeric Deliberations,” *op. cit.* pp.3-8.

did my spirit (*thymos*) debate these things?" (*Il.* XI, 407). Odysseus decides to stay and fight. In a similar position Menelaus undergoes the same internal deliberation before quickly deciding to flee. The result is different, but the process is the same for both men. They canvass their options before tiring of debating within themselves and quickly come to a final resolution. Once the resolution is taken, it is enacted without hesitation.⁵⁹ Neither Menelaus nor Odysseus is overwhelmed by hesitation or indecision and both fulfil the key ingredient of the Homeric hero which is the ability to act.

The transparency of Homeric narration

The transparency of Homeric man is also true of Homer's narration. The epics celebrate heroism. The reader can be seduced by the heroism of Homer's characters and try to emulate their behaviour and action in his own life.⁶⁰ The enormous body of interpretative literature on the Homeric epics frequently loses sight of this simple fact and tries to find a deeper or more profound meaning or agenda in the epics.

The Homeric epics, Silk argues, should be read in the same spirit as one watches sport because they are "primarily celebratory, not exploratory."⁶¹ The Homeric oeuvre celebrates a way of life. The reader or auditor is invited to join Zeus and the fellow gods and look down on the action and enjoy it in the moment.⁶² The *Iliad* and even more so the *Odyssey* are exciting and gripping stories, the first about anger and the second about revenge. Neither epic takes a moral or judgmental stance on Achilles' anger or Odysseus' revenge. The acts are celebrated. The epics can be read on multiple levels, including purely for entertainment. This is how the original audience would have interpreted the stories and "found the poems no less fascinating and meaningful for it."⁶³ It should be remembered that the poems would have been

⁵⁹ Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are littered with these brief internal debates. In the *Odyssey*, and again from Odysseus. "The patient, good Odysseus considered carefully whether he should fell him with a mortal blow or knock him to the ground with a much gentler punch. In the end he decided on the lighter blow" (*Od.* 18, 88-91).

⁶⁰ A modern reader might apply the lessons of heroism to her life.

⁶¹ Silk, M., *Homer: The Iliad*, [Landmarks of World Literature], Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.102.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁶³ Van Wees, H., *Status Warriors*, *op. cit.*, p.126.

sung by a bard as part of the after dinner entertainment when a prince held a feast, as Odysseus himself hears the stories of the Trojan war sung by the bard Demodocus in King Alcinous' palace (*Od.* 8, 470-530). In such an environment the stories would have been heard as one watches modern action films – enjoyed for the moment with a transparent moral dimension.

Ironically it is what Silk labels the 'celebratory' aspect of the text, a label I prefer to render as simplicity, that has enabled such an enormous body of secondary literature to develop. Scholars have tried to lend a 'deeper' meaning to Homer. But if the transparency and simplicity of Homeric characters and narration are taken into account, such scenes must be interpreted at face value. As Bernaloff, who, writing on the Bible and the *Iliad*, states:

the more intimate our commerce with these two divinely inspired books, the more suspicious we become of symbolic interpretations that charge them with too rich a meaning.⁶⁴

In his essay *How the Young Should Listen to Poetry*, written as a letter to a fellow father with a son of about twelve, Plutarch, the Greek Roman (c.46-9 – 125AD), comments extensively on the interpretation of myths. However, "like most ancient writers, Plutarch has relatively little to say about the interpretation of literary texts, and in this sphere his hermeneutic strategies are largely pragmatic."⁶⁵ The son would have learnt in his rhetorical education that meaning (*dianoia*) was "a largely non-problematic element of texts."⁶⁶ On Homer, in particular, Plutarch is highly critical of allegorical interpretations. The problem arises with the passages in Homer that had been criticised for centuries, notably by Plato, for their sexual explicitness, which borders on obscenity, in particular Hera's seduction of Zeus (*Il.* XIV, 153-351). Plutarch writes: "Some people forcefully distort these stories, using what used to be called "hints" (*hyponoiai*) but now are called "allegories" (*allegoriai*), ... as if the poet did not himself supply solutions Look at what Zeus says to her" Plutarch

⁶⁴Bernaloff, *On the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p.109.

⁶⁵ Lamberton, R., *Plutarch*, Hermes Books, Yale University Press, London and New Haven, 2001, p.48.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

implores. “Just see if fawning and sex do you any good – after you came from the other gods and tricked me into bed!” (*Moralia* 19e-20b, *Il.* XV 32-3).⁶⁷

The embassy scene of Book Nine of the *Iliad* further demonstrates the mutual transparency of emotion, thought and action of Homeric man. When Achilles' absence on the battlefield proves disastrous for the Greeks, Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles with the offer of an extravagant ransom should he re-join the fighting. Achilles rejects Agamemnon's reconciliatory gifts and, after flirting with the notion of setting sail for home the next day, he decides to stay idle beside his ships until the fighting “reaches the ships of the Myrmidons [Achilles own people]” (*Il.* IX, 650). The literature about this scene, despite Plutarch's stricture, shows how allegorical interpretations have become endemic in Homeric scholarship. The breadth and width of interpretations of the embassy scene is indicative of the breadth of Homeric scholarship generally.⁶⁸ The simplicity and transparency of both the characters and narratives of the epics enables later interpreters to impose their own idealised code of behaviour onto the Homeric epics.

Achilles' rejection of the embassy has been interpreted in a multitude of fashions by Homeric scholars. Zanker and Rabel believe Achilles is disillusioned with the heroic code. As he no longer cares about the esteem in which he is held by his peers, Achilles renounces the desire for honour that is central to the heroic code.⁶⁹ Achilles' rejection of the embassy puts him squarely in the wrong in the eyes of his

⁶⁷ Cited in Lamberton, *Plutarch, op. cit.*, pp.48-49.

⁶⁸ Zanker, G., *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad*, [Paperback ed.] The University of Michigan Press, 1996, p.87-91; Rabel, R., “Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Interpretation of *Iliad* 9,” *Arethusa*, 30:2, Spring 1997, pp.297-307; Griffin, J., *Homer on Life and Death*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, pp.99-100; Hammer, D., “Who Shall readily Obey? Authority and Politics in the *Iliad*,” *Phoenix*, No.1, Spring 1997, pp.1-24; Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad, op. cit.*, p.105. Commentary on Homer was already common in the ancient world. In addition to Plato's extensive treatment of the Homeric heroes in the *Republic*, there is also Aristotle's *Poetics* and Homer is mentioned in the fragments that remain from the sixth-century BC Xenophanes.

⁶⁹ Zanker, G., *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad*, [Paper back ed.] The University of Michigan Press, 1996, p.87-91. Rabel similarly argues “Achilles' answer to the embassy intimates that he regards his services as a gift to be freely shared rather than a response dictated by need or personal ambition.” Rabel, R., “Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the Interpretation of *Iliad* 9,” *Arethusa*, 30:2, Spring 1997, pp.297-307, p.305. Griffin too contemplates Achilles' complete disillusionment with the heroic code, Griffin, J., *Homer on Life and Death*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, pp.99-100.

peers. Phoenix tells him “Up till now your wrath has not been a matter of *nemesis*” (*Il.* IX 523); Diomedes dismisses Achilles as a recalcitrant whose pride is merely consolidated by supplicating him (697-700); Aias believes that nobody could reasonably reject Agamemnon’s offer. Aias tells Achilles that men accept compensation from the killer of a brother or son, but Achilles will not accept this extravagant ransom for one woman (632-39). Aias is also stunned that Achilles is not moved by the Greeks’ suffering, whatever his attitude to Agamemnon. Achilles has left his companions in the lurch and they are disappointed by his behaviour, but no one questions his heroic status, emphasising that upholding the communal interest is not necessary for heroic status.

Achilles’ supposed rejection of the heroic code is taken as evidence that Homer, too, rejects the heroic code and is defending an alternative model of life, frequently considered to be the more restrained action, entailed in the contemplation and consideration of citizens living harmoniously in a *polis*. In a similar vein, it has been argued that Achilles is rejecting the entire political organisation that is personified by the character of Agamemnon.⁷⁰ Such readings of the *Iliad* will be examined more closely in the following chapter. Redfield, on the other hand, admires Achilles’ “ethical fundamentalism and purity of spirit” by setting the heroic standard at an impossibly high level, and maintaining his quest for honour in the face of such bribery from Agamemnon.⁷¹

Achilles’ rejection of the embassy does not, however, intimate, suggest or imply a deeper meaning. Following Plutarch’s advice to ignore supposed hints in the text and read the epics at face value provides a clear meaning as intended by Homer, and one that is consistent with the general theme of transparency enabling action leading to heroism. Homer makes Achilles’ motivations in rejecting Agamemnon’s gifts clear. Achilles refuses to be the loser in their dispute:

⁷⁰ Hammer, D., “Who Shall readily Obey? Authority and Politics in the *Iliad*,” *Phoenix*, No.1, Spring 1997, pp.1-24.

⁷¹ Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p.105. Redfield writes: “Achilles’ refusal of the warrior’s role is an affirmation of the warrior’s ethic; the absoluteness of that affirmation makes Achilles the greatest hero.” p.105.

not if his gifts were as many as the grains of sand and particles of dust, would Agamemnon win me over. First he must pay me in kind for the bitter humiliation I endured (*Il.* IX 423-426).

Achilles evidently wants Agamemnon to retract his earlier statement about being the better man of the two, which despite his great offer of gifts, he has not done. After listing his gifts, Agamemnon reiterates that “Yes let him [Achilles] submit himself to me, who am his senior by so much, as both a man and as a king” (*Il.* IX 195-196). Achilles maintains his desire to be the best man, the ultimate hero of the Trojan war, and refuses to submit to Agamemnon. There is nothing to indicate that Homer is retracting his advocacy of heroism as superior human action.

Achilles’ only deviation from this path is to let Patroclus join the fighting in his armour and with his troops. When Patroclus is killed by Hector, a new situation arises which demands a new response. Achilles’ grief is clearly articulated and follows a logical sequence. Achilles blames himself for Patroclus’ death and wishes it were he who had died, but he realises that “what is done is better left alone” (*Il.* XVIII 112).⁷² Achilles regrets the past, but he cannot change it, so he does not dwell on it; instead he plans his course of action for the future, which is to seek his revenge on Hector.⁷³ Once Achilles fights, he does not abate until he has reached his goal of revenge by killing Hector.

Similarly, once Hector has decided that he must face Achilles in single combat, he remains deaf to the pleading of his father, mother, and wife who beg him to return to the safety of Troy. Hector’s thought process is clear and simple.

⁷² Muellner distinguishing between grief and guilt, maintains that Achilles feels grief but not guilt at Patroclus’ death. Muellner, L., *The Anger of Achilles: Mēnis in Greek Epic*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, p.161.

⁷³ Like Achilles, Helen is capable of regret at being the cause of the war. Helen’s regret is constrained in the same manner as Achilles’; she “wished bitter death ... It did not happen that way” (*Il.* III, 173-76); and later “I should have died before I came” (*Il.* XXIV, 763). Helen does not sink to the maddening self-torment of Lady MacBeth: “Here’s the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (V i). Helen acknowledges her mistake and moves on, in the same way Achilles does. When we meet Helen in the *Odyssey* she seems to have adapted comfortably to her new life with Menelaus.

He thought: 'If I retire behind the gate and wall, Polydamas will be the first to cast it in my teeth that, in this last night of disaster when the great Achilles came to life, I did not take his advice and order a withdrawal into the city, as I certainly ought to have done. As it is, having sacrificed the army to my own perversity, I could not face my countrymen and the Trojan ladies in their trailing gowns. I could not bear to hear some commoner say: "Hector trusted in his own right arm and lost an army." But it will be said, and then I shall know that it would have been a far better thing for me to stand up to Achilles, and either kill him and come home alive or myself die gloriously in front of Troy' (*Il.* XXII 99-110).

Hector continues his internal debate and considers making a pact with Achilles, until he pulls himself up with "the now familiar formula"⁷⁴ of "why do I contemplate such a course?" (*Il.* XXII, 122). Hector's internal reasoning is reminiscent of Achilles' reaction to the death of Patroclus. Hector recognises his mistake in failing to withdraw when Achilles awoke and consequently having his army destroyed. Hector is lucid in attributing the blame to himself, but he can equally see that there is nothing he can do about it now so he does not dwell on the past. Hector's initial mistake has changed the reality of the situation, leaving him with two choices: he can either retreat with his pride wounded or redeem himself by a fight to the death with Achilles. After debating both options, Hector settles on confrontation with Achilles. Hector does lapse into an uncharacteristic moment of hesitation. He attempts to flee, which leads to the burlesque scene of Achilles chasing him around the walls of Troy. Hector's moment of hesitation is quickly overcome as he regains his composure and usual determination and turns to face Achilles. Surely Hector can be forgiven his last minute nerves. Whilst Achilles is only risking life, a life he does not want any more, Hector is risking everything: his wife, his son, his family, his city. In the end

Hector makes a last effort, which would have to be called superhuman, did it not precisely define the height and breath of man's powers: he turns and faces his enemy, having first mastered himself.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Lawrence, "Self-Control in Homeric Deliberations," *op. cit.*, p.9.

⁷⁵ Bespaloff, *On the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

In summary, the externalisation of Homeric man leads to transparency of motive, desire and emotion, and a lack of duplicity or self-doubt in both the characters and the narration. The mind and the body are taken to the very extreme of human experience in the *Iliad*. There is no flabbiness of body or of mind on any man in the *Iliad*. After ten years of war, the warriors of the *Iliad* are in peak physical condition, lean and muscular, and this external appearance reflects the internal thought processes. There is nothing superfluous about Homeric man. This empowers both the individual and the community as every action is clearly defined and is real; stated bluntly, what you see is what you get.

The claim that Homeric man and the narration of the epics are transparent applies to the *Iliad* more so than the *Odyssey*, and even in the *Iliad* there are of course exceptions to such an all-encompassing theory. The vacillating Agamemnon cannot decide whether to stay or leave Troy.⁷⁶ He appears deceitful and he is racked by self-doubt. Homer's Agamemnon, however, is less indecisive than some of his later incarnations,⁷⁷ and his one true moment of deceitfulness, the test of the troops' morale with a lie in Book Two, is directed at the 'inferior' masses, which devalues its importance. On the whole, Agamemnon, like the other heroes, only revisits his decisions when the circumstances change. He steadfastly refuses to accept the ransom for Chryses' daughter until his refusal results in a plague being sent upon his army. He only regrets taking Briseis from Achilles once Achilles' absence from the battlefield results in the decimation of his troops.

Odysseus' deceitfulness is harder to incorporate into a theory of transparency and simplicity because it is such a central plank of his character. Odysseus is often considered "a figure completely isolated in the epics, an 'untypical hero' par excellence."⁷⁸ Odysseus is distinguished from the other heroes by his love of food,

⁷⁶Agamemnon thrice advises a hasty retreat. The first time Agamemnon advises a retreat it is in jest to test the morale of the troops in Book One; later Agamemnon advises retreat in all seriousness at the beginning of Books Nine and Fourteen.

⁷⁷Romilly de, "Les hésitations d'Agamemnon," *op. cit.*, p.11. Homer does not make reference to Agamemnon's tortured decision to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenie to guarantee the success of his army.

⁷⁸Finkelberg, M., "Odysseus and the Genus Hero," *op. cit.*, , p.4. It should also be noted that the scheming and deceitful aspect of Odysseus' character is more pronounced in the *Odyssey*. There is no

his skills as an archer, his intellectual curiosity and his ability to devise stratagems to overcome obstacles rather than bashing his way through in an Achilles or Hector-like manner. Whilst Odysseus does not fit the normal patterns of Homeric heroism, his stratagems are not born from cowardice or Hamletesque indecision, Odysseus simply thinks his way through problems.⁷⁹ He too, like all Homeric heroes, acts.

Conclusion

Homeric man thinks what he feels, he says what he thinks and he does what he says. This liberates him to act with the totality of his being, empowering him to perform great deeds. If he has any confusion as to what he thinks or feels, he briefly deliberates, comes to an immediate resolution and sticks to that resolution until the circumstances change. He does not think one thing and say another, he does not say something only to act differently. Homeric man, to use a Nietzschean phrase, is not a “half-and-half man.” His determination is ferocious, his mind is resolute and he will move towards his goal with the totality of his being.

An ability to act is the key to heroism in the Homeric epics. A reader who draws this lesson will never be reduced to an incoherent babbling fool like Thersites. It is this ability to act regardless of the difficulty of the situation he faces that enables the Homeric hero to perform deeds and achieve feats that live on in human memory forever, which bestows upon him immortal glory. Immortal glory is the hallmark of heroism for Homer, as it is the means by which man can challenge the confines of humanity by overcoming the mortality of man.

Founding heroism on action is ultimately a limited form of heroism. The Homeric hero remains an actor in an environment he does not control. His heroism is one of reaction and his reactions remain dominated by personal motivations. When a man’s quality is so intrinsically linked to action, frequently martial action that leads to individual glory regardless of wider consequences, it augurs poorly for communal living. In a society with a conception of the common good and collective means of

trickery or scheming, even on Odysseus’ behalf, in the *Iliad*. The fall of Troy and the treacherous gift of the wooden horse are conspicuously absent.

⁷⁹ Stanford vigorously defends Odysseus from the barrage of criticism he has received since Ancient times. Stanford, W., *The Ulysses Theme*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, pp.66-80, 254-6.

seeking it, impulsive action must be restrained. In a *polis*, a citizen's actions cannot be determined by personal desire at all times. Action that is subordinated to the common good requires the restraint of individual drives. It requires deliberation and hesitation. The very qualities that make the Homeric hero great are those that preclude him from making the transition to an heroic citizen, as the following chapter will demonstrate.

CHAPTER 2

Homeric *Polis*: The absence of a *Polis*

In the last ten years an increasing number of Homeric scholars have argued that the *Iliad* is an ideological poem which champions the values of the emergent *polis* over the values of the aristocratic *oikos* (household or private estate).¹ This view is antithetical to the orthodoxy that had been established by Moses Finley, who saw “not a trace” of the *polis* in the epics and, later, by Arthur Adkins, who argued that competitive virtues were dominant in the heroic code.² To view Homer as a defender of the *polis* is counterintuitive because an initial reading of the Homeric epics reveals a pre-state society. Leadership is personal rather than institutional, there is no coinage, no official monopoly on violence, and no established legal system or independent enforcement of law. Homeric society (that is, the society depicted by Homer) does not meet any definition of state, ancient or modern, nor does it meet the criteria of a monarchy. I argue that whilst modern scholarship, which views the *polis* as central to an interpretation of the *Iliad*, has refined and clarified the image of the Homeric hero, it has equally exaggerated the importance of the *polis* and consequently the relevance of the cooperative virtues of citizenship to the heroic code.

This thesis argues that Homer’s model of heroism was historically superseded as a model of higher human achievement precisely because it failed to offer guidance for people living together in a political community. The Homeric hero was the chieftain of an agriculturally based and loosely interconnected community. His primary concern was gaining honour for himself in the hope of achieving immortal glory. As honour was primarily gained by a display of prowess on the battlefield, the

¹ Scully, S., *Homer and the Sacred City*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1990; Seaford, R. *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994; Dunkle, R., “Swift-Footed Achilles,” *Classical World*, 90:4, March/April 1997, pp.227-235; Finkelberg, M., “*Timē* and *Aretē* in Homer,” *Classical Quarterly*, 48(I), 1998, pp.14-28; Farenga, V., “Narrative and Community in Dark Age Greece: A Cognitive and Communicative Approach to Early Greek Citizenship,” *Arethusa*, 31.2, 1998, pp.179-206; Rose, P., “*Therites* and the Plural Voices of Homer,” *Arethusa*, 21(1), Spring 1988, pp.5-26; Rose, P., “Ideology in the *Iliad*: *Polis*, *Basiliues*, *Theoi*,” *Arethusa*, 30:2, pp.151-199; Raaflaub, K., “Politics and Interstate Relations in the World of the Early Greek *Poleis*,” *Antichon*, Vol. 31, 1997, pp.1-27.

² Finley, M., I., *The World of Odysseus* [1954], Penguin Books, second edition, 1979, p.34. Adkins, A., *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* [1960], Oxford University Press, 1970.

hero's quest could benefit the community as he was the stalwart of the community's defence, but he was not motivated by a desire to help or protect others. The system of values and virtues upheld in the epics, the heroic code, is antithetical to the human qualities needed for a *polis*, which prioritises the individual good and the good of the *oikos* over all other interests. Indeed, even amongst those who maintain that the epics champion the values of the *polis*, some, such as Weil and Hammer, argue that the heroic code is so obviously flawed that Homer must be presenting it negatively, as a model that exposes its shortcomings.³ The flaws of the code are abundantly clear for the modern reader to see, but to argue that Homer rallies against the limitations of the heroic code rests on the faith that Homer shares the same values cherished in present-day liberal democracies: impersonal political institutions, even-handed justice, and an aversion to violence. Such values were foreign to Homer. The models proposed by Finley and Adkins, whilst not without their flaws, remain a more accurate reflection than the opposing extreme of interpretations that place the co-operative values of the *polis* at the heart of the epics.

Finley and Adkins

For Finley, there was no concept of the *polis* to be found in the Homeric epics. Similarly, Adkins found no qualities in the heroes that lent themselves to citizenship. Finley's hugely influential work, *The World of Odysseus* [1954], depicted Homeric society as a series of communities centred around atomistic aristocratic households (*oikio*) headed by a patriarch, who doubled as a local chieftain (or prince) of the area. Finley's image of Homeric society resembles the Hobbesian state of nature. Put simply, one's vegetable patch is only safe if one has the means to prevent marauders taking the produce from the garden. A prince who lacked strength due to excessive youth or old age, or lacked personal connections to call upon in times of need, only maintained a tenuous hold of power. The 'chieftains' relied on "wealth, personal prowess, connections by marriage and alliance and retainers" to guarantee their positions.⁴ Nestor, for example, is too old to protect himself and his family. Yet he

³ Weil, S., "The *Iliad* or the poem of force," [Originally published as "*L'Iliade* ou le poème de la force" [signed Emile Novis], *Cahiers du Sud*, XIX, 230, December 1940 - January 1941] *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, trans. McCarthy, M., Virago Press, London, 1986, pp.182-215; Hammer, D., "Who Shall Readily Obey? Authority and Politics in the *Iliad*," *Phoenix*, 51(1), 1997, pp.1-24.

⁴Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, *op. cit.*, pp.77-78.

remains the family patriarch and the local ruler because he can count on the physical strength of his sons and other connections to offer protection and support in the case of a dispute. In contrast, Odysseus' father, Laertes, is forced into a humiliating and degrading retreat to the countryside in his son's absence because he is overpowered by the Suitors (*Od.*, 1, 189-93, 11, 187-96, 12, 353-8, 24 227-33).⁵ The only law enforcement in such a society rests in the power of a strong arm. It is a politically amoral and fragmented society where might is right and justice is understood in a pre-Socratic manner as harming enemies and helping friends. For Finley, there was no polity in the sense of an organised society ordered by civil modes of administrating and managing public and private affairs.

In such an environment war between communities was frequent. Brigandage and raids were common in a culture where the brigand captured admiration for his daring and successful display of force whilst the victim attracted scorn and derision for his inability to defend himself. Full-scale war was also frequent because there were no means other than war to settle disputes between communities. These wars were wars of annihilation. Agamemnon objects to his brother sparing a Trojan, Adreteus, on the battlefield.

No; we are not going to leave a single one of them alive, down to babes in their mother's wombs – not even they must live. The whole people must be wiped out of existence, and none be left to think of them and shed a tear (*II. VI*, 55-60).

The hero is a prince who stands at the forefront of battle and protects his community, giving no quarter to the enemy. The hero's need to prove himself in battle and the community's need for defence are concordant, but the hero is not motivated by the common good. The hero is motivated by his personal interests, and, as was shown in the previous chapter, his desire for immortal glory. All the fighting in the *Iliad*, with the exception of the espionage mission of Book Ten, is based on the pure, naked force

⁵ Scully claims “[f]or reasons we cannot altogether understand, Laertes has abandoned whatever authority may have still been invested in him.” Scully, *Homer and the Sacred City*, *op. cit.*, p.101. Laertes is hounded out of his position of authority by the numerically superior suitors. Likewise, Achilles is concerned that in his absence, his father may be “dishonoured ... because old age has taken hold of his hands and feet.” Achilles wishes he were there to protect his father, “If only I were there to defend him ...” (*Od.* 11, 494-503).

of men opposing each other. The fighting is a series of individual battles within the war and there appears to be no strategy or communal spirit, other than one champion calling out to another to help defend a certain position. It has been mistakenly suggested that the formative stages of phalanx battle can be seen in the epics as the Greeks benefit from their ability to fight in formation, whereas the Trojans are an undisciplined rabble on the battlefield.⁶ Phalanx battles rely on all men contributing equally, as the front line of the phalanx is only as strong as its weakest member. The Iliadic warriors did not fight in formation, the battle is frequently represented as turning on the outcome of individual duels by the champions of the respective sides. The equal worth of all soldiers inherent in later phalanx formation is contrary to the *Iliad's* celebration of one heroic man's power to single-handedly change the course of events. The plot of the *Iliad* rests on the assumption that the Greeks can only win the war if Achilles takes up arms; Troy can only fall once Hector is felled.

Not every local prince chooses to devote himself to war and glory as Achilles does. A prince can choose to “work on the land and domestic pursuits that make for a fine family of children” (*Od.* 14, 222-3). Odysseus makes it clear that:

war and javelins and arrows [are] miserable things, which are horrifying, which make other people shudder. ... for different men find satisfaction in very different ways of earning a living (*Od.* 14, 225-6).

The local prince who chooses not to devote himself to war, such as Anchises who offered Agamemnon a mare to be excused from going to Troy (*Il.* XXIII, 295-297), may be a very good local leader, but he cannot be a hero. The hero must face the possibility of death. This choice, spectacularly made by Achilles and Hector, is repeated by hundreds of minor Iliadic warriors when they “volunteered to come to Troy in order to win glory in war.”⁷

⁶ Onians, J., *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1999, pp.10-12.

⁷ Finkelberg, M., “Odysseus and the Genus Hero,” *Greece and Rome*, xlii(1), April, 1995, pp.1-14, p.1.

Sarpedon gives what many believe to be the clearest articulation of the heroic code when he encourages Glaucus to further battle in the much-quoted passage:

Glaucus, why do the Lycians at home distinguish you and me with marks of honour, the best seats at the banquet, the first cut off the joint, and never empty cups? ... Does not all this oblige us now to take our places in the Lycian van and fling ourselves into the flames of battle? Only so can we make our Lycian men-at-arms say this about us when they discuss their kings: "They live on the fat of the land they rule, they drink the mellow vintage wine, but they pay for it with their glory. They are mighty men of war, and where Lycians fight you will see them in the van" (*Il. XII*, 310-321).

Sarpedon goes on to say that if they were assured of "ageless immortality", he would neither fight himself nor order another to fight "to win honour in the field", but as death is inevitable they must seek glory and immortal fame (322-4). Sarpedon goes into battle to win glory. Concomitantly, he is risking his life to save the community and is rewarded with honour and privileges from his community. The hero gains *kleos* for himself. He demands the same privileges from the community whether he is protecting the community from an aggressor or is responsible for placing his community at risk by dragging it into war, as Paris has by refusing to return Helen to Menelaus.

Finley established that in the search for honour, physical strength overrides all other considerations. For this reason, I quote Finley at length:

'Warrior' and 'hero' are synonyms, and the main theme of a warrior culture is constructed on two notes – prowess and honour. The one is the hero's essential attribute, the other his essential aim. Every value, every judgement, every action, all skills and talents have the function of either defining honour or realising it. Life itself may not stand in the way. The Homeric heroes loved life fiercely, as they did and felt everything with passion, and no less martyr characters could be imagined; but even life must surrender to honour. The two central figures of the *Iliad*, Achilles and Hector, were both fated to live short lives, and both knew it. They were heroes not because at the call of duty they marched proudly to their deaths, singing hymns to God and country – on the contrary, they railed against their doom, and Achilles, at least, did not complain less after he reached

Hades – but because at the call of honour they obeyed the code of the hero without flinching and without questioning.⁸

Finley concludes that “[t]he heroic code was complete and unambiguous.”⁹ It dictated that heroes seek honour, and honour was only gained by a display of warriorhood. The ultimate honour came with the warrior’s final and potentially last test, the willingness to face death in battle.

Adkins, in *Merit and Responsibility* [1960], concurs with Finley, and argues that physical strength is the most valued quality in Homeric society because it is the most useful. The concept of estimating values according to their utility was articulated by Nietzsche most fully in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (First Essay), and applied specifically to Homer in the early *Human all too Human* (Entry 45). By examining the lexical usage of words such as ‘good’ and ‘virtue’ in several different cultures, Nietzsche discovered that these terms “originally had no connection with unegoistic or benevolent actions, but rather denoted the preferred activities and existential “being” of powerful noble strata.”¹⁰ Adkins, applying Nietzschean observations to Homer, believes there is no need for the “quieter values” of cooperation, temperance, justice and wisdom in Homeric society, and therefore these qualities are not valued. Adkins argues that for Homer, and the later Greeks, the noun *arētē* and its corresponding adjectival form *agathos* are terms of such high commendation that they effectively end an ethical argument “simply because there is no word of greater value in the language.”¹¹ In the Homeric epics:

to be *agathos*, one must be brave, skilful, and successful in war and in peace; and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment.¹²

⁸Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰ Bryant, J. M., *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece: A Sociology of Greek Ethics from Homer to the Epicureans and Stoics*, State University of New York Press, 1996, p.30.

¹¹Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, *op. cit.*, p.6

¹²*Ibid.*, p.33.

In Adkins' estimation of the heroic code, the hero does not consider right or wrong, he merely seeks to maximise his honour by a display of "skill and courage."¹³ Physical prowess was the essential attribute required to gain honour. Achilles, the main character of the *Iliad* and the story's greatest hero, has the highest kill rate in the *Iliad* and it is therefore reasonable to assume that one's killing rate effectively determines one's heroic standing. Hyginus (*Fabulae*, 114) gives statistics of the 'kills' recorded by the Greek champions. Achilles leads with 72, followed by Teucer (30) – Teucer kills at a distance with the bow which is clearly a less demanding and less manly method of killing than single combat – and the greater Aias and Diomedes (28). Further down the list come Agamemnon (16), Odysseus (12) and Menelaus (8). The complete number of Greek kills is 362. This list correlates to the common soldiers' rating of their champions. The soldiers believe that in Achilles' absence from the battlefield either Aias, Diomedes or even Agamemnon himself has the best chance of winning if drawn to fight Hector in single combat (VII, 179-180).¹⁴

In Finley's view, the 'chieftains' were little more than local 'big men' running a protection racket, and neither the *Odyssey* nor the *Iliad* has any trace of a *polis* in its classical political sense. For Finley, the "[p]olis in Homer means nothing more than a fortified site, a town."¹⁵ Strasburger had gone further and noticed only a "so-called town"¹⁶ in Homer:

Basically the *polis* [in Homer] is still nothing more than the settlement centre (fortified, it is true, in most cases) of a tribal community which makes its living from the land. We must not be surprised that in Homer no villages are mentioned, since with the exception of its possible fortification the *polis* is still a village in character.¹⁷

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.55.

¹⁴ Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ed. Rose, H., Sythoff, Leyden, 1933, p.86. On the Trojan side Hector leads with (31), followed by Aenas, the second in command of the Trojan forces, (28), followed by Paris (3) and Sarpedon (2). The Trojan total of kills is 88.

¹⁵ Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, *op. cit.*, , p. 34.

¹⁶ Strasburger, H., [1952] "The Sociology of Homeric Epics," trans. & ed. Wright, G. & Jones, P., *Homer: German Scholarship in Translation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997, pp.47-70, p.52.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.51.

The community consisted of a dependent or servile class who serviced the needs of the village big man. “Their subservience is established through the client system typical of a patriarchal society.”¹⁸ In times of peace the hero was merely a farmer who had the biggest estate.¹⁹ A village, for Aristotle, is a conglomeration of the “off-shoot” households formed by the sons and grandsons of the original patriarch. The original patriarch rules over the village as he ruled over his own household (*Politics* I.ii, 1252b). A village succeeds natural pairs (man/woman, master/slave), but precedes the *polis*.

The heroes had no qualities that lent themselves to citizenship. Indeed, one could say that it is anachronistic even to suggest such a proposition. Heroes did not believe in moderation or co-operation. Adkins claims that Homeric society is not more advanced than that of the Cyclopes. The Cyclopes lead completely autonomous lives, without laws or assemblies, without cultivation of the land and in disregard for their neighbours. Each Cyclops lives in his own cave with his own little flock of sheep and area of land on which wild fruit grows. Odysseus and his crew look down on the complete lack of institutional and social organisation of the Cyclopes (*Od.* 9, 105-143), yet their own society, Adkins argues, is ultimately not very different to that of the Cyclopes.²⁰ Aristotle too seems to suggest that Homeric society is not far removed from the organisation of the Cyclopes. In his discussion on the nature of a village, Aristotle quotes Odysseus’ assessment of the Cyclopes’ society without mentioning that the line is delivered by Odysseus to describe the Cyclopes and not his own society. “This kind of rule is mentioned in Homer: ‘Each man has power of law over his children and wives’” (*Politics*, I.ii, 1252b, *Od.* 9, 114-5).

Finley and Adkins’ interpretations of the Homeric hero as egocentric, aggressive and competitive have some well-known and well-documented shortfalls. If the predominance of physical prowess is at the expense of all other qualities, the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.52.

¹⁹ Strasburger provides considerable textual evidence demonstrating the heroes undertaking manual labour and farming tasks.

²⁰ Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, *op. cit.*, p.54. Adkins takes a major departure from orthodoxy at this point. The episode of the Cyclopes is generally thought to be included to demonstrate the level of social organisation of the Homeric world by way of juxtaposition.

Homeric hero becomes nothing more than a self-serving, barbaric brute. Achilles under this reading of the heroic code would reach his peak of glory following his murderous rampage following Patroclus' death, yet the textual evidence, especially the use of similes by the narrator and Achilles himself, indicates that Achilles reaches his nadir during these episodes because he effectively becomes an animal. When Hector tries to reach a pact with Achilles about the treatment of the loser's corpse, Achilles replies: "Lions do not come to terms with men" (*Il.* XXII, 262). Achilles sees himself as the lion. Later, Achilles tells the dying Hector "I only wish I could summon up the appetite to carve and eat you raw myself" (*Il.* XXII, 346-347).²¹ Achilles becomes cruel and inhumane. Lycaon, "without helmet or shield, and he had no spear left" (XXI, 50), grasps Achilles' knees begging for mercy when Achilles kills him. There is nothing noble or courageous in killing an unarmed man who is on his knees.

Adkins and Finley were aiming at historical reconstructions of the society depicted in the Homeric epics rather than literary interpretations. They could therefore ignore scenes pivotal to dramatic or moral interpretations. This is methodologically flawed because such a reconstruction reduces the Homeric epics to quasi-historical texts. A more careful literary interpretation of the epic poems, especially the pivotal scenes, produces a clearer image of the 'heroic ideal' as it was envisaged by Homer.²² For example, in the final book of the *Iliad*, Achilles regains his humanity by agreeing with grace and eloquence to ransom Hector's body to Priam. This, at least partly, restores the harmony between the quieter cooperative values and the competitive values that is needed to empower the ethical code. In the face of death, Achilles manages to restore pity, affection, fairness and respect to their rightful place. Indeed, Achilles' generosity and kindness towards Priam, which is

²¹ The damning judgement of Achilles is also passed by Apollo when he witnesses Achilles' treatment of Hector's corpse: "the brutal Achilles ... who has no decent feelings in him and never listens to the voice of mercy, but goes through life in his own savage way ... Achilles like the lion has killed pity" (XXIV 40-47). Revealingly Achilles' closest friend, Patroclus, comes to the same conclusion as Apollo when he compares the pitiless Achilles, the Achilles who refuses to help as his comrades face annihilation by the rampant Trojans, to a monster of the sea and rocks (*Il.* XVI, 33-35).

²² Finley and Adkins ignore the embassy scene of Book Nine, in which Achilles rejects Agamemnon's reconciliation gifts, and the final book of the *Iliad* in which Achilles accepts to ransom Hector's body.

reciprocated by Priam, moved Zanker to write a chapter on Achilles' magnanimity.²³ This mutual magnanimity and the restoration of Achilles' humanity mark the purity of this transaction and restore the real and higher notion of *timē* (honour).

Finley and Adkins' respective models were undoubtedly monolithic, concentrating on the end result of Homeric man's transparent continuum of emotion, thought, speech and action. With the modifications suggested here, it becomes possible to envisage Achilles singing and "delighting his heart in a lyre" (*Il.* IX, 186) without finding the whole scene burlesque. Adkins and Finley both also underestimate the importance to the heroic code of giving wise counsel. The key to the Homeric hero's greatness is not simply his ability to act, but his ability to act in a manner that concurs with his emotions, his thoughts and his speech. If one concentrates on the process rather than the most visible result – decisive action on the battlefield – it is easier to incorporate the purity of the Homeric hero's speech as well as his action into an understanding of the heroic code. Achilles' greatness is not founded uniquely on his ability to cut a path through opposing armies, but on his ability to articulate why he does so.

To accept that the hero is not the reckless action man presented by Finley and that, contrary to Adkins' assertion, the hero is capable of showing the quieter qualities such as tenderness and magnanimity, does not, however, entail accepting that the hero is an embryonic citizen driven by the concerns of an embryonic *polis*. Despite the flaws of their interpretations of Homeric society, both Finley and Adkins provide a closer approximation of the values and motivations of the Homeric heroes than those scholars who find within the epics embryonic citizens, as I will show.

Seeking a *polis* in the *Iliad*

It should be noted that scholars have not argued that the Homeric *polis* was a fully developed abstract conception of the state such as the fifth century *polis*. But it has been suggested that the Homeric works evoke an embryonic *polis* that can be

²³ Zanker, G., *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad*, [Paperback ed.] The University of Michigan Press, 1996.

retrospectively viewed as a fore-runner to the fifth century *polis*.²⁴ Stephan Scully, for example, argues that the Homeric *polis*:

can in time be re-interpreted in abstracted and political terms as the place of human perfectibility, devotion to the good, and aspiration toward “perfect self-sufficiency” with aspects of immortality. The sources of the Aristotelian view of the city as somehow separate from the natural world, freed from the necessities of existence associated with the *oikos*, and finally a place where mortals can contemplate the infinite – these sources may be traced to their nonphilosophical and nonpolitical counterparts in the Homeric portrayal of the city as a stable and walled community of humankind set apart from the natural landscape, protected under the eyes of the Olympian gods, and in fundamental manner *hirē* (holy).²⁵

Scully’s *Homer and the Sacred City* has been one of the most influential texts in forwarding the argument that the *Iliad* promotes the unity and harmony of the *polis* over the competitive virtues of the hero. According to Scully, the *polis*, as it exists in Homer, is a shifting entity sometimes resembling a fully developed *polis*, and at other times more closely resembling a more primitive community. There is, Scully writes, “a sense in the Homeric *polis* of a political community or of a constructive principle of *nomos*, norms sacred and profane, written and unwritten, which reflected the intense political and spiritual unity of the *polis*.”²⁶ He goes on to warn that the real and ideal do not all coincide. Overall, for Scully, the *Iliad* cannot, however, be read as a poem uniquely about Achilles’ wrath, because this wrath attains “its most far-reaching associations only when seen in the context of Hector and its threat to Troy ... An analysis of the *Iliad* must, therefore, focus on both figures, and more properly on the relationship *between* the two.”²⁷ For Scully, this relationship can only be properly analysed in the context of Hector’s association to the *polis*. For Hector, at least, the heroic code is meaningless without the conglomerate of *oikio* (households), which form the *polis*. The *polis* is the “seat of strength and endurance over which the fight

²⁴ Features of the *Iliad* are “conductive to civic unity.” Heiden, B., “The Ordeals of Homeric Song,” *Arethusa*, 30(2), 1997, pp.221-240, p. 212.

²⁵ Scully, *Homer and the Sacred City*, *op. cit.*, p.113.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.14-15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.116.

for women, children, and wealth acquires meaning and honour.’²⁸ The tension between heroic action in terms of the self-seeking hero, who is uniquely concerned with his glory and the wellbeing of his immediate family, and the hero as defender of the *polis* is resolved by Scully in the case of Hector by establishing that what was good for his *oikos* was also what was good for the *polis*.²⁹ Effectively, Hector’s personal interests are subsumed by the interests of the *polis*, or at least, his personal interests and those of the *polis* are concomitant. Scully concludes that Hector is presented by Homer as a ‘generic’ defender of the city, a man who values the interests of the *polis* over his own life. He is presented as a prototype of the good citizen.

Hector, however, is not a citizen sharing equally with others the benefits and duties of life in a *polis*. He has an abnormally large share in the community. He is the family link between the present ruler, Priam, his father, and the next ruler, his son, Skamandrios, who is renamed Astyanax, meaning ‘lord of the city’, by the inhabitants of the city. By defending Troy, Hector is protecting his family’s predominance in the interests of Troy. Hector’s actions are not even those of a King doing his best for his subjects, Hector is not seeking the common good. He admits in Book VI that his greatest fear is the enslavement of his wife and death of his son, not the defeat of Troy (*Il.* VI, 444-449). For Hector, the interests of the so-called *polis* are subordinated to the interests of his *oikos*. A conception of *polis*, conceived in an Aristotelian sense of leadership that seeks the common good, does not enter Hector’s considerations. In Greek understanding the *polis* consisted of the men who made up the *polis* and not the physical space.³⁰ The *polis* is therefore the civil administration of a group of men under the rule of law, where the law considers the common good. Hector serves the common good by taking his place on the battlefield, but saving the community is not Hector’s primary objective. Hector is driven by his personal interest which, in this case, coincides with the communal interest.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.60-61.

³⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, [1958], The University of Chicago Press, [Second Ed.] intro. Canovan, M., 1998, p.198.

Hector's actions can only be described politically as those of a tyrant. Tyranny is described by Plato as rule "in defiance of written codes" by someone who lacks true knowledge (*Statesman*, 301c), and by Aristotle as rule with disregard to the common interest (*Politics*, II.vi, 1279b, *cf. Ethics*, VIII.x, 1160b).³¹ A tyrant, for Aristotle, rules by force rather than persuasion because he rules an association of unequals, and he rules ultimately in his own interests rather than the common interest. Much later, Montesquieu would succinctly describe a despotic government as one where "one alone governs according to his wills and caprices" as opposed to a monarch, who rules alone but "according to established laws"³². A tyrant can be benevolent, as Hector appears to be, because his rule is buttressed by persuasion as well as force. Hector enjoys popular support because he is doing what most in the community consider to be the right thing. Where persuasion fails, however, Hector reverts to violence and he can do so because his rule is ultimately founded on force. Tyranny cannot co-exist with the *polis*, which is a political association of equals where leadership acts under the demands of the common good. Again, it must be stressed that the common good and popular opinion do not necessarily coincide. Hector's actions in the *Iliad* are those of a typical hero who is defending his personal domain and seeking *kleos*, undying fame. His actions do not point to the existence of an embryonic *polis* or imply that his interests are commensurable with those of a *polis*.

Scully's argument that the correlation of the hero's family interests and the community's interests, in the case of Hector, signify an embryonic *polis* should equally apply to Odysseus. Odysseus' reunion with his family and the restoration of his leadership are clearly good things for Odysseus and his *oikos*, but they are equally good for the larger community on Ithaca. Scully concedes that his argument does not work as well in the case of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. He argues that the *Odyssey* is primarily concerned with Odysseus' return to his homeland and his reunion with his

³¹ For Plato, the tyrant rules without possessing the true knowledge that a philosopher King (in the language of the *Republic*) and a true Statesman (in the language of the *Statesman*) have which enable them to deviate from written codes "if it is *best*" to do so. The tyrant, unlike the philosophical ruler deviates from written codes when there is "some desire or other combined with ignorance controlling this imitation [of the philosophical ruler]" (*Statesman*, 301c).

³² Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* [1784], ed. and trans Cohler, A., Miller, B. & Stone, H., Cambridge University Press, 1989, Part I, Bk3, Ch.2, p.21.

wife and family, and only secondly with his desire to re-establish himself as king or ruler. “From a poem that is so focused on the *oikos*, it seems unreasonable to derive categorical statements about the Homeric *polis*.”³³ Furthermore, Ithaca is clearly a more primitive and modest human settlement than Troy. It is clear from the *Odyssey* that Odysseus’ rule was better for Ithaca than the corruption and slovenliness of the Suitors who have usurped Odysseus’ palace. Penelope remembers Odysseus’ rule: “never a harsh word, never an injustice to a single person in the land. How different from the usual run of kings, favouring one man, persecuting the next” (*Od.*, 4, 689-92). Odysseus’ rule was still, again according to Aristotle’s categories, pre-political because he ruled “like a loving father” (*Od.*, 5, 12). Odysseus *might* meet the demands of ruling in the common interest, but he does not meet the demands of ruling a political association of equals, nor does he exercise leadership under the rule of law. Neither Hector nor Odysseus interacts with their community in a manner that is suggestive of the leadership and methods of rule that mark a *polis*, despite being lovable and apparently well-intentioned community leaders.

Scully’s thesis that the *Iliad* is a defence of the *polis* is most famously buttressed by his exhaustive study of Homeric epithets and their context. The epithets are the commonly repeated adjectives such as “swift-footed Achilles” or “much enduring Odysseus.” Milton Parry’s long held and influential view of the epithets is that they were simply devices to facilitate memorisation of the poems.³⁴ Scully’s unorthodox reading of the epithets considers them as the most expressive element of Homeric poetics.³⁵ To simplify a complex argument, Scully points out that epithets of praise are used to describe the *polis* in the *Iliad*, but not the *oikos*.³⁶ The epics were

³³ Scully, *Homer and the Sacred City*, *op. cit.*, p.104.

³⁴ Milton Parry, *L’Épithète traditionnelle dans Homère: Essai sur un problème du style homérique*, Paris, 1928.

³⁵ Scully, *Homer and the Sacred City*, *op. cit.*, p.4.

³⁶ Other scholars have also diverged from Parry’s explanation of the epithets and seen the epithets as central to an interpretation of the epics. Foley has suggested that the inappropriateness of certain epithets in Homer poses a problem of interpretation for the audience which he calls a “gap of indeterminacy” – the inappropriate epithet signposts a paradox that must be resolved to reveal a deeper normative meaning. Foley, J. M., *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1991, p.41. Following Foley’s thesis, Dunkle believes it is only by overcoming the paradox of the immobile “swift-footed” Achilles that Homer’s conception of the heroic will be revealed. Achilles only uses his legendary speed when chasing Hector around the walls of Troy. For the rest of the epics, the “swift-footed” Achilles is mostly stationary. It is whilst sitting in

composed orally and were originally heard rather than read. Whatever the prodigies of memory and attentiveness claimed for an oral culture, the concept that the ‘true’ meaning of the epics can only be arrived at once the works have been carefully subjected to textual analysis, with all occurrences and context of the epithets counted and tabulated, does not concord with a work of oral poetry of 16,000 lines. Such a level of attention to detail would escape the most careful first-time reader, so one who heard the poem, presumably sung at a drunken dinner party, could not possibly be expected to pick up nuances of the kind Scully suggests. To seek a hidden meaning in the epithets is untenable if the transparency of Homeric narration is accepted.

Scully has not been alone in seeing Hector’s association with the *polis* as holding the key to a true, deeper normative model of human excellence conveyed in the epics. Homer takes the reader behind the walls of Troy with Hector in Book Six of the *Iliad*. Believing, like Gottschall, that “Hector, strolling through Troy, is the picture of civilised goodness. ... a realization of the humane ideal”³⁷ is to apply value judgements that are completely foreign to Homer. There is no reason to believe that Hector, the tender family man interconnecting in a myriad of ways with members of his community, is a more extolled model of human achievement than Hector, the frenzied warrior hell-bent on assuring his *kleos* on the battlefield. This involves applying very modern sentiments to war and bloodshed to an ancient text. Right up until the First World War, war was widely viewed as a positive force for humanity. The Prussian military historian and theorist, Heinrich von Treitschke (1834-96) was expressing a view far more closely aligned to Homer when he “extolled ‘the greatness of war’, ‘the sublimity of war’, ‘the moral majesty of war’ and derided the notion of eternal peace as ‘not only impossible but immoral as well.’”³⁸ For Homer, war was

his hut that Achilles undertakes his journey of self-reflection that will lead to wisdom. During Patroclus’ funeral games Achilles gives up the role of competitor in favour of a role as mediator. The previously disruptive Achilles shows the way to cooperation and reconciliation. In the final book, Achilles extends this newfound temperance to his enemy. “By the end of the *Iliad*, Achilles’ pre-eminence has transcended the physical. His new *arete* is characterised by reflection, insight and acceptance.” Dunkle, “Swift-Footed Achilles,” *op. cit.*, p.234.

³⁷ Gottschall, J., “Homer’s Human Animal: Ritual Combat in the *Iliad*”, *Philosophy and Literature*, 25(2), 2001, pp.278-294, p.280.

³⁸ Treitschke, von H., *Politics* [1898], London, 1916, pp.395-6, 599, cited in Blanning, T., *Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, Longman, London, New York, 1986, p.1. Even after the First World War, poetry denouncing the grim reality of war, such as that of Owen, Sassoon and Graves, was still outnumbered and overshadowed by poets singing the praises of the glorious fulfilment offered by war.

the essential ingredient in transforming ordinary men into heroes who could serve as models of aspiration for others.

The need for struggle is essential to all conceptions of heroism. The hero is a man who faces and overcomes obstacles and limitations. Central to the conception of struggle in the Homeric epics is war. Homer's war is not a sanitised war; death and injury are described in such detailed and realistic fashion that it has been suggested that Homer must have been a physician.³⁹ War itself is not glorified. It is, especially for the common men, hateful. When it is believed that the war will be decided and brought to an end by a duel between Menelaus and Paris, "[t]he Trojans and the Greeks were joyful, hoping now to be rid of all the sorrow of war" (*Il.* II, 111-112).⁴⁰ But for the princes, the subject of the *Iliad*, war is also magnificent. It is the necessary catalyst for men to achieve greatness. Without war, the ceiling of man's achievement appears to be the Suitors of the *Odyssey*. The Suitors are weak, boastful, rude, vulgar, wasteful men whose concerns, and in fact whose entire existences, are petty, frivolous and ultimately futile. The Suitors are pale shadows of the heroes of the *Iliad*, a point forcibly demonstrated when Odysseus slaughters them. Only war can make men great because war is the only theatre grand enough to provide a fitting death for the Homeric hero. Witness Achilles' disgust when he believes he will drown in the river:

I wish now that Hector had killed me, the greatest man grown in this place. A brave man would have been the slayer, as the slain was a brave man. But now this is a dismal death I am doomed to be caught in, trapped in a big river as if I were a boy and a swineherd (*Il.* XXI, 281-282).

Cf. Mangan, J., "Games Field and Battlefield: A Romantic Alliance in Verse and the Creation of Militaristic Masculinity," *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity*, Eds. Chandler, T., & Nauright, J., Frank Cass, London, 1996, pp.140-157.

³⁹ Pound, E., "Homer or Virgil," *Homer a Collection of Critical Essays*, Eds. Steiner, G. & Fagles, R., Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1962, pp.17-18. "When he describes certain blows and their effect, the wounds are said to be accurate, and the description fit for coroner's inquest." (p.17)

⁴⁰ Witness also the Greek troops' rush to flee Troy when in Book II Agamemnon, in a disastrous test of their morale, offers them the opportunity to be rid of the miseries of war.

War is miserable for the common soldiers who are cannon fodder for the reputations of the princes, but for the princes themselves, heroism is not possible without war and hence it is futile to seek a condemnation of war in Homer. War provides Achilles with a heroic death, whereas accidental drowning would reduce him to a swineherd.⁴¹

Hector himself does not condemn war during his interlude with his wife and son in Troy. If Hector favoured the life of the *oikos* and its part in the *polis*, he would wish at this moment for his son a long and prosperous life with a few goats and a good woman. Hector would have none of that. In full consciousness that war will inevitably destroy everything he loves and makes him who he is – his life, his city, his family, his son, his wife – Hector holds his fat baby in the air and wishes for him a glorious career as a warrior:

Then he kissed his son, dandled him in his arms, and prayed to Zeus and the other gods: ‘Zeus, you and the other gods, grant that this boy of mine may be, like me, pre-eminent in Troy; as strong and as brave as I; a mighty king of Ilium. May people say when he returns back from battle, “Here is a better man than his father.” Let him bring home the bloodstained armour of the enemy he has killed, and make his mother happy’ (*Il.* VI, 473-481).

For Hector, his son will only become a better man than he is by killing more enemies on the battlefield. For Hector, as for Homer, a frenzied warrior causing mayhem and winning glory on the battlefield is a more estimable character than a gentle family man who displays the constraint and self-sacrifice of a true citizen subordinating his personal interests to the common good. Unlike Plato and Rousseau’s heroic citizens, Hector and the other heroes do not meet the demand for self-sacrifice to a higher cause. The Homeric man remains an heroic man, but he is not an heroic citizen.

Richard Seaford is another central figure in the movement to interpret the Homeric epics as advocating the benefits of an embryonic *polis*. Seaford concludes that in parts the epics champion the values of the *polis* by examining the role that ritual, especially funeral rituals, and reciprocity, both amicable such as gift-giving and

⁴¹ Cf. *Od.* 5, 299-312. Odysseus too wishes he died a glorious death at Troy when he fears he will drown at sea.

hostile such as revenge killings, plays in maintaining social cohesion in the Homeric epics. Both epics, Seaford argues, centre on crises in ritual and reciprocity, which are only resolved after prolonged disputes within the Greek camp at Troy and on Ithaca. This resolution of crisis does not reaffirm the heroic code, but rather, in the final definitive sixth-century Athenian versions of both texts, has been tempered to meet the needs of the *polis*.⁴² For Seaford, in the absence of social institutions required to overcome conflicts, ritual and reciprocity functioned in Homeric society as pre-state collective institutions, which nonetheless retained a private impetus. Private actions in the *Iliad* accomplished public purposes and can hence be seen as primitive state based actions. For example, money would come to replace gift exchange in Greek culture, but both ultimately fulfil the same function. Similarly, a legal system would come to supersede the hostile reciprocity (revenge killings) with socially agreed punishment for crime. Law courts and coinage replaced time-honoured methods of transactions between people with state methods, which exist in conjunction with certain timeless transactions that do not change in nature such as crime and purchase.⁴³

Seaford believes the more community oriented scenes, including Hector's conflict between family and city in Book VI, the urban scenes on Achilles' shield, Achilles' reintegration into Greek society after his destructive wrath has been channelled to benefit the community, and Hector's funeral in Book XXIV, are all later insertions made by the Peisistratean cultural program for the Panathenaea of the sixth century.⁴⁴ There are, according to Seaford, effectively two Homers: the Homer who remains from the 'formative stage' of the eighth century and portrays a pre-state

⁴² Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual*, *op. cit.*, p 144-159. Seaford's work on Homer is part of his larger thesis that attempts to demonstrate that Dionysus is the deity who presides over the process by which the interests of the *polis* come to subordinate the interests of autonomous households. Countering the Nietzschean view of Dionysus as a manifestation of disorder, Seaford sees Dionysus and Dionysian inspired cults as promoting civic unity in the *polis* by transforming previously private rituals into public events, and drawing women away from the isolated and exclusive *oikos*. Seaford examines the progression of Dionysian inspired cults from ritual and reciprocity in three stages: Homer, the tragedians, and fifth century Athens.

⁴³ Seaford writes: "[b]oth law court and coinage constitute an external, state backed authority which replaces diachronic reciprocity between transactors by a universal diachronic criterion persisting through numerous discrete synchronic transactions (crimes, purchases)." Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual*, *op. cit.*, pp.205-206.

⁴⁴ Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual*, *op. cit.*, pp.144-154.

society where Adkins' competitive virtues reign supreme, and the definitive sixth-century Homer who promotes civic virtue. The scenes Seaford highlights are communal events, but they do not necessarily entail a *polis*. Seaford embraces the "analyst" approach of attributing the epics to different authors from different periods. His analyst approach is extreme; it maintains that the epics are not only the result of tinkering on the edges of a given plot by later authors, but that the plot itself is a melange from different authors and modifiers.⁴⁵ The end result, for Seaford, is a 'canonised Athenian' version dating from the sixth century.

If the epics were so fundamentally modified to incorporate an ethics of *polis* based on harmony and unity one wonders why the modifiers did not do a better job of it. Seaford argues that the original end to the *Odyssey* is when Odysseus and Penelope restate their marriage vows (*Od.* 23, 296). At this point a private ritual brings an end to a conflict. The following pages, in which Odysseus kills the Suitors, and Athene intervenes to prevent the Suitors' relatives taking revenge on Odysseus, extend the resolution of conflict to the community as a whole. However, modifying the end of the story to feature the local chieftain killing a great number of well-to-do young men of the island is surely not the most effective and persuasive way of re-enforcing the community values of the *polis*. The Suitors are presented as lesser men than the mighty Odysseus, but they have not deliberately wronged Odysseus, whom they believed was long dead. They have, as was their right, tried to woo Penelope whom they considered to be a widow.⁴⁶ The misunderstanding between a returning Odysseus and the Suitors might well have been cleared up – on Seaford's theory – by a private ritual carried out with intentions to resolve what had become a public issue, in this case a customary gift exchange or compensation from the Suitors to Odysseus. But Odysseus, like Achilles or Menelaus, could not have accepted compensation from the Suitors because he cannot accept the slight against his name and will only rest when his honour is restored. Odysseus' honour can only be restored with a display of

⁴⁵ Seaford relies heavily on Nagy, G., [1979] *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, revised ed., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1999 and Nagy, G., "Homeric Questions," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 122, 1992, pp.17-60.

⁴⁶ Strasburger, "The Sociology of Homeric Epics," *op. cit.*, pp.65-66. Strasburger argues that the Suitors were within their rights in consuming Penelope's possessions whilst she made up her mind, because those possessions would become the property of the successful Suitor.

martial excellence. Odysseus placed his personal honour, demonstrated by his superior physical prowess, over the interest of the community. Odysseus' interest and the common interest may be considered to coincide, as by killing the Suitors, Odysseus re-establishes his benevolent tyranny of Ithaca, which is clearly better than the anarchy that reigned in his absence. However, the good of Ithaca is not paramount to Odysseus. He acts primarily to secure his own interests.

A critique of the presence of *polis*-orientated institutions in the epics cannot remain silent on the fact that Telemachus, Odysseus' son, calls an assembly, the most *polis*-orientated institution imaginable, at the beginning of the *Odyssey* (1, 371-2, 259). It is, however, the first time an assembly had been called for twenty years (*Od.* 2, 26-7). The last one was held before Odysseus left for Troy, presumably as a recruitment drive for Agamemnon's army. The very fact that life can go on for twenty years on Ithaca without an assembly being called demonstrates the extent to which Ithaca is a community that exists in the absence of political institutions and civil administration. There is nothing formal or legal about the assembly that Telemachus calls and it only comes to an uneasy resolution to the dilemma of what to do with the Suitors who are living in Odysseus' house and waiting for Penelope to come to a decision as to whom she will marry.

Finley and Adkins' interpretations of the Homeric hero as a brute obsessed with demonstrating his martial ability were monolithic. However, it is equally 'monolithic' to deny the Homeric hero's competitive edge and minimise his selfish quest for glory. There is nothing explicit in the epics to suggest that Homer is defending the values of the *polis*. Other commentators have argued that Homer champions the *polis* by highlighting the series of human catastrophes that the heroic code produces.⁴⁷ Such interpretations rest on the belief that Homer, like the modern scholar, could not fail to recognise the superiority of the values of justice, cooperation and moderation that are essential to the *polis*, but foreign to the heroic code.

⁴⁷ Weil, S., "The *Iliad* or the poem of force," op. cit., pp.182-215.

The heroic code as an anti-model

The most evident flaw of social organisation depicted within the Homeric epics is that the heroic code lacks procedures to resolve the conflicts that such a code will inevitably create. The heroic code is centred on the competitive quest for honour, yet contains no political or judicial mechanisms or procedures for resolving disputes about honour in a non-violent fashion. This reality is omni-present in the *Iliad*: an unresolved conflict between Paris and Menelaus is the impetus for the Trojan war. The unresolved conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles, whether the honour of the best warrior is greater than the honour of the king, provides the central plot.

The heroic code is competitive because honour in Homeric society was concretely measured, allowing individuals to compare their level of respective honour as opposed to the more abstract ‘virtue’ urged by later Greek philosophers.⁴⁸ This distinction between honour and virtue is captured by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748].⁴⁹ Virtue, for Montesquieu, constituted a selfless concern and sacrifice for the public good. Plato’s Philosopher King, it will be seen, is driven by virtue. On the other hand, “the nature of honour is to demand preferences and distinctions.”⁵⁰ A man who seeks honour seeks personal privilege. As Lynn observes, “[s]uch preferences and distinction could possess monetary [or material] value, but more importantly, they were the currency of status.”⁵¹ The Homeric hero is driven by personal gain and status and clearly falls into the category of an honour-seeker. The comparative nature of Homeric honour is captured by Peleus, Achilles’ father’s, advice to his son: *aien aristeuein*, always to be the best and excel above the others (*Il.* XI, 784, VI, 208). It is axiomatic that there can only be one who excels above all the others, and this inevitably leads to competition for honour amongst the warriors.

⁴⁸ Bryant, *Moral Codes and Social Structure in Ancient Greece*, *op. cit.*, p.31.

⁴⁹ Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, *op cit.*, Part I, Bk.3, pp. 21-30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ch.7, p.27.

⁵¹ Lynn, J., “Towards an Army of Honor: The Moral Evolution of the French Army, 1789-1815,” *French Historical Studies*, 16(1), Spring 1989, pp.152-173, p.154.

The competitive aspect of the Homeric code is present in the most trivial aspects of daily life in the epics.⁵² An illuminating example is the flare-up between Idomeneus and the lesser Aias over the quality of Idomeneus' eyesight. During the chariot race at Patroclus' funeral games Idomeneus claims to be the first to recognise the leading horses as they approach the finish line from the distance. Aias disputes Idomeneus' version and tells him that as he is not the youngest of men, his eyesight is poor and he should keep his opinions to himself. The implication is that Aias himself has the sharper eyesight. The dispute escalates and "would have gone further still if Achilles himself had not leapt to his feet and intervened" (*Il.* XXIII, 450-498). The two warriors are prepared to have a punch up to decide who has the sharpest eyesight. What appears to the modern reader as histrionics is the Homeric norm, and provides a compelling case for the dominance of the competitive virtues over the cooperative virtues of citizenship.

This perpetual 'contest' in every aspect of life in Homeric society filtered down through all of Ancient Greece and would later be much admired by Nietzsche. Nietzsche saw the contest as a means for the continual improvement of a people because they were all trying to outdo each other. Nietzsche even suggested that Xenophanes and Plato's attacks on Homer were motivated by a desire "to assume the place of the overthrown poet [Homer] and to inherit his fame."⁵³ Acampora claims that Nietzsche sees his philosophical project as a series of contests with other thinkers whereby his ideals and concepts will emerge victorious and much improved by the process of contest.⁵⁴

Alvin Gouldner went so far as to assert that the competition for honour "approximates a zero-sum game, in that someone can win only if someone else

⁵² Women doing the laundry "make a competition of it" (*Od.* 6, 91-2). The disguised Odysseus boasts "No mortal can compete with me in manual skills: in properly laying a fire and splitting logs, in carving and roasting meat and pouring wine" (*Od.* 15, 321-3). When told by one of the leading Suitors, Eurymachus, that he is too lazy to do manual work, the disguised Odysseus replies that he would shame Eurymachus if they were to have a competition in manual labours (*Od.* 18, 366-75).

⁵³ Nietzsche, F., *Homer's Contest*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Kaufman, W., Penguin Books, 1982, pp. 32-39, p.36.

⁵⁴ Acampora, C., "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, issue 24, 2002, pp.25-53, pp.25-26.

loses.”⁵⁵ This presupposes that there is a limited pool of honour and one can only gain honour at another’s expense. Clearly, the honour game is competitive, but to suggest this implies a “zero-sum game” oversimplifies the range of contest. Honour can be gained in more than one way. Giving wise counsel is a more subtle form of action than prowess on the battlefield, but both actions confer honour and a direct correlation between these honours is not always possible. Even at a uniquely military level a zero-sum approach to honour that considers that one man can only gain honour when another loses honour is untenable as a successful army will have more honour to share than a defeated army.

Redfield argued that the English notion of honour is subdivided into three Greek terms. Firstly, there is *kudos*, which is something allotted by the gods, a lustre or presence. *Kudos* can be gained by owning a fine horse or armour; it is “an absolute quality like health or strength.”⁵⁶ Secondly there is *kleos*, which Finkelberg translates as ‘glory.’⁵⁷ *Kleos* is won and taken. Thirdly there is *timē*, which is status. Agamemnon may be said to have greater *timē* and arguably *kudos*, because he is king, whilst Achilles clearly has more *kleos* because he is the superior warrior.

Disputes amongst the Homeric heroes revolve around establishing the pecking order for *timē* and establishing which of the three aspects of honour should be the most esteemed. When the supreme leader, Agamemnon, comes into conflict with the supreme warrior, Achilles, primarily over who has the greatest claim to honour and respect, no answer emerges as to who is in the right. Opinion amongst the other characters of the *Iliad* is divided as to who should efface himself. Nor does the narrator offer an opinion. Although Achilles does become a better person when he puts aside his extreme violence, the *Iliad* does not point to or indicate what is the correct resolution of dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon. By the end of the story, all that can be said is that Achilles and Agamemnon put aside their differences.

⁵⁵ Gouldner, A., *Enter Plato: Classical Greece and the Origins of Social Theory*, Routledge & K. Paul, London, 1965, p.49.

⁵⁶ Redfield, J., *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, p.33

⁵⁷ Finkelberg, M., “Time and Arete in Homer,” *The Classical Quarterly*, XLVII:1, January 1998, pp.14-28, p.16.

Achilles' motivation in rejoining the fighting is entirely personal: he wants to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus by killing his slayer, Hector. Agamemnon puts aside their dispute because he wants to regain the services of his best fighter. When the feud is ended, Achilles neither apologises to Agamemnon nor acknowledges Agamemnon's right to rule. Achilles simply says: "we must let bygones be bygones" (*Il.* XIX, 65). Agamemnon acknowledges that he made a mistake in taking Briseis from Achilles, but in his view the mistake lay in misjudging Achilles' influence on the battle, rather than dishonouring Achilles.⁵⁸

Homeric society is guided by an ethical code that breeds disputes typified by Agamemnon and Achilles' quarrel, yet it possesses no political mechanisms to resolve these disputes. Once the only means of reconciliation, the giving of gifts, fails, there is no recourse other than to violence. In essence, Homeric society has all the hallmarks of a stateless and apolitical community. Political leadership is tyrannical as it is personal and is exercised in the absence of laws. In the absence of law, violence becomes the absolute arbiter. Indeed, violence appears to be the only reliable and consistent method of resolving conflict.

The human actor, as Plato would argue in his discussion on the powerlessness of the tyrant (*Gorgias*, 466a-468e) and Arendt would repeat, is never fully in control of his actions because he cannot know the consequences of his acts.⁵⁹ The *Iliad* is full of examples of those who hold power effectively harming themselves with that power. Agamemnon has the power to refuse the ransom that Chryses, Apollo's priest, offers for the return of his daughter, Chryseis, who was taken by Agamemnon as a slave-girl. The abuse of this power leads to the plague amongst his men and the start of all his problems with Achilles. Agamemnon has the power to deprive Achilles of Briseis, a decision that ultimately leads to the routing of his troops. Achilles, in turn, has the power to let his Greek comrades be massacred and this massacre results in the death of his best friend. Hector has the power to abuse Patroclus' corpse by stealing

⁵⁸ Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, *op. cit.*, pp.50-51.

⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, pp. 141, 191-2, 243-7.

his armour, a choice that will lead to his death at the hands of Achilles, and eventually the destruction of Troy.

The impotence of an actor to control the effect of his power is accentuated in the *Iliad* because political action is premised on forceful submission guaranteed by violence, or the threat thereof. Simone Weil concluded that the *Iliad* recognises the frailty of violence as a form of power and furthermore effectively rallies against it. Weil, who wrote during and was clearly influenced by the Second World War, wished to establish that (systematic) violence in society and culture was not a uniquely contemporary affliction, but a constant feature of human societies. She argued this by going to the source of Western civilisation where she observes a society that is controlled by, but cannot control, violence. For Weil “[f]orce [ie. power through violence] is as pitiless to the man who possesses it” as it is to its victims.⁶⁰ Force is a wild beast that a man can only tame temporarily. It is pitiless to the “man who possesses it” because he cannot know, at the instant he uses it, what its effect will be.

On a personal level, violence is equally ineffectual. According to Bespaloff, Achilles’ murderous rampage demonstrates the limitations of force and brutality:

Through cruelty force confesses its powerlessness to achieve omnipotence. ... Unable to admit that total destruction is impossible, the conqueror can only reply to the mute defiance of his defenceless adversary (Lycaon, Hector’s corpse) with ever-increasing violence.⁶¹

Once Achilles has killed Hector he continues to abuse Hector’s body for twelve days. An end to this mistreatment only occurs when Achilles receives the order from Zeus to give up Hector’s body. Achilles’ violence and cruelty do not lead to satisfaction or serenity of mind. It is only with the renunciation of revenge that Achilles finds fulfilment and serenity and becomes a better and happier person.

⁶⁰Weil, S., “The *Iliad* or the poem of force,” *op cit.*, p.191.

⁶¹Bespaloff, R., *On the Iliad* [1947], trans. McCarthy, P., [Second Hardcover Ed.] Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1970, p.57.

The *Iliad* provides numerous examples supporting Weil's seductive argument about the impotence of violence. However, Weil provides no textual evidence in support of the second part of her claim: that the *Iliad* recognises the impotence of violence and rallies against it. For Weil, "[t]he whole of the *Iliad* lies under the shadow of the greatest calamity the human race can experience – the destruction of a city."⁶² The destruction of a city represents the destruction of forces that are, for Weil, superior to violence: justice, progress, peaceful life, co-operation. To destroy a city symbolises profound human regression – and this is true of Homeric Greeks, German Nazis or any other aggressor. There is, however, no firm textual evidence that Homer recognises this truism. In fact, for Homer, the immanent destruction of Troy is a celebration of the Greeks' superior fighting ability. Clutching at straws, Weil writes: "[j]ustice and love, which have hardly any place in this study of extremes and of unjust acts of violence, nevertheless bathe the work in their light without ever becoming noticeable themselves, except as a kind of accent."⁶³ The qualities Weil seeks, the recognition of the innate superiority of peaceful cooperation, human harmony and love, are, she would have us believe, conveyed by Homer without being spelt out in the epics. It is incongruous that the epics, which celebrate boldness and fearlessness, would convey a moral message in an essentially furtive manner by imparting it without it being noticeable.

Violence can be an efficient means of maintaining political power if it is held in conjunction with legitimate authority. The principle of political power maintained by force is famously formulated by Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan* [1651]. The essential condition of Hobbes' sovereign Leviathan is that all those who consent to the rule of law imposed by Leviathan abandon their right to liberty, including the right to violently achieve their desired ends, as a consequence of authorising the Leviathan's monopoly on authority and political violence. The principle of rule in the epics is similar with the important qualification that there is no social contract and hence no political or legal authority other than the rule of the strong. The political leadership of the epics is akin to Hobbes' rule of the Leviathan in the absence of the rule of law. The epics recognise that a unifying force, in the form of an arch-ruler, is

⁶² Weil, "The *Iliad* or the poem of force," *op. cit.*, p.209.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.208.

necessary to suppress disputes and enable the community to function. Odysseus states the principle:

Many lords are not good. Let there be one lord,
One King, to whom crafty Cronos' son gave
The sceptre and decrees, to be their King (*Il.* II, 203-206).⁶⁴

The difference between the principle of political organisation in the *Leviathan* and the epics is that subjects do not consensually abandon their right to violence. Where the disparity between the ruler's ability to wield violence and the subject's ability to reply in kind is large, violence, or the threat of it, ensures harmony. Zeus' supreme physical strength is enough to secure his power over the other immortals as his threats are not hollow. When Zeus bellows: "If I find any god or goddess taking an independent course ... he shall be thrashed ignominiously and packed off to Olympus" (*Il.* VIII, 8-27), the other gods obey because they know that Zeus has the power to carry out the threat. Zeus' authority is derived from his physical power and is maintained by violence and awe, whereas the *Leviathan's* authority is derived from the social contract and the legal equality it guarantees. Hector maintains authority over the Trojans by his use or threat of force. When Hector disagrees with Polydamas' advice of caution and partial retreat, Hector settles the dispute by threatening Polydamas: "None the less, if you do shirk, or dissuade any others from fighting, I shall not hesitate to strike you with this spear and take your life" (*Il.* XII, 247-250). For Agamemnon, like Zeus and Hector, violence as a means to power is effective against the ordinary foot soldier; Odysseus can beat Thersites into submission on Agamemnon's behalf. When it comes to dealing with the other princes, however, Agamemnon's kingship is founded on a castrated model of the *Leviathan*. In the absence of any political institutions, he must secure his rule through violence over those who have not renounced violence, and indeed whose ability to wield violence is equal and at times even greater than his. Achilles is on the verge of killing Agamemnon until he is restrained by Athene (*Il.* I, 188-214). Agamemnon, likewise, resorts to violence to enforce his will, telling the messengers he sends to collect Briseis: "If he refuses to let her go, I shall come in force to fetch her" (*Il.* I,

⁶⁴ This is Lattimore's translation, which is clearer than Rieu's at this point.

323-324). Achilles does not physically try to prevent the petrified heralds who have come to collect Briseis, but if he had, a civil war could well have erupted between Agamemnon and the men loyal to him and Achilles and those loyal to him.

By the end of the *Iliad*, it is not only Achilles who challenges Agamemnon's power, but the other princes too. At the start of the ninth book, Agamemnon repeats the call to flee in the ships. No one moves. They sit "in speechless dejection" (*Il.* IX, 29) until Diomedes breaks the silence to object to "you [Agamemnon] and this imbecility of yours" (IX, 32). Diomedes chides Agamemnon for his lack of courage and openly states that he will stay on at Troy regardless of what Agamemnon does. Whereas Achilles challenged Agamemnon's power by threatening to leave, Diomedes does so by threatening to stay. Again at the beginning of Book XIV, when the Trojans are bearing down on the ships, Agamemnon suggests a hasty retreat. This time it is Odysseus who disabuses him of such a disastrous decision. Odysseus explains that a hasty retreat would be fatal as they would all be slaughtered before even setting the ships afloat because they would have their backs to the advancing Trojans. Agamemnon is open to persuasion, but if the others fail to persuade him, he still has recourse to absolute violence to enforce his will, as he does with Achilles on the issue of taking Briseis. The discussion amongst the princes is not carried out by a community of equals so it cannot qualify as a political association on Aristotelian definitions.

Agamemnon was not chosen or elected to his position but born to it. The unsuitability of his character for the role is frequently highlighted in the scholarship. In an excellent account of Agamemnon's leadership, Redfield argues that it is not stupidity, arrogance and cruelty that lead to Agamemnon's series of mistakes, but the limitation of options he has at his disposal to secure his leadership.⁶⁵ There was some support in ancient Greece for the view that Agamemnon was not the incompetent imbecile he is often presented as being. As Isocrates notes:

⁶⁵ Agamemnon's major errors are: his refusal to accept Chryses', Apollo's priest, ransom for his daughter which results in Apollo sending a plague unto Agamemnon's men; taking Briseis from Achilles; the disastrous test of the troops morale in Book Two and repeated calls thereafter to flee; and his general ineptitude as commander once deprived of his best soldier. Redfield, J., *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, *op. cit.*, pp.92-98.

and yet [Agamemnon] held an army together for ten years, not by great bribes nor by outlays of money, by which all rulers nowadays maintain their power, but by the supremacy of his genius, by his ability to provide from the enemy subsistence for his soldiers, and most of all by his reputation of being better advised in the interest of others than others in their own interest (Isocrates 12 *Panatheniakos* 82).⁶⁶

The dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles in the Greek camp highlights the failure of the Homeric political structures. Achilles calls the assembly to resolve the issue of the plague that has struck the Greek forces and by doing so he sets himself up as being independent of Agamemnon's authority. Furthermore, Achilles extends his immunity to authority to another when he offers his personal protection to Calchus, the prophet and interpreter of dreams who announces that the King is responsible for the plague that will only end when Chryses' daughter is returned. Agamemnon is willing to acknowledge his mistake and return Chryses' daughter. The ability to recognise mistakes is an admirable quality for a leader, but Agamemnon must also reassert his authority over Achilles and Calchus, and maintain his status. If he is left as the only prince without a *geras* (war-prize), he will be perceived as weak (*Il.* I, 118-119). Agamemnon must establish firm political control over the other princes to maintain the unity of the Greek forces, yet he has no institutional support with which to achieve this task. The dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon, two men fighting for the same cause and a part of the same Greek community, is a difficult political situation and Agamemnon is out of his depth, but no one could resolved his dilemma. By relying exclusively on violence to solve political dilemmas, Agamemnon is following the divine model of kingship as practised by Zeus. It is a model that is flawed for Agamemnon because it operates in the absence of a monopoly of violence. A man, however powerful, cannot exercise a monopoly of violence in the absence of legitimate structures of state authority.

⁶⁶ Cited in Pritchett, K., *The Greek State at War* [1971], University of California Press, 1974, Vol.1, p.31. Cf. Socrates' assessment "I wonder if you have noticed what a silly sort of general Agamemnon is made to look on stage when Palamedes claims to have invented number, and so organised the army at Troy and counted the ships and everything else. It implies that nothing had been counted before and that Agamemnon, apparently, did not know how many feet he had, if he couldn't count. He must have been a funny sort of general" (*Republic*, 522c-d).

The reliance on violence as a political tool in the absence of a monopoly on violence leads to boundless violence that engulfs entire communities. The hero does not single-handedly solve his own problems, but rather mounts a coalition of his ‘mates’ before taking action. The private conflict becomes a public conflict drawing in the men and the resources of entire communities, many of whom are not directly involved in the initial dispute. If one accepts that the theft or seduction of Helen is the cause of the Trojan War, what is essentially a private dispute between Paris and Menelaus becomes a full-scale war involving 60,000 troops on the Greek side and 50,000 on the Trojan side.⁶⁷ The other princes have not come to the Trojan War with their men for reasons of their own. Achilles makes this clear to Agamemnon:

It was no quarrel with the Trojan spearmen that brought me here to fight. They have never done me any harm. They have never lifted a cow or horse of mine, nor ravaged any crop that the deep soil of Phthia grows to feed her men The truth is that we joined the expedition to please you; yes, you unconscionable cur, to get satisfaction from the Trojans for Menelaus and yourself (*Il.* I, 151-159).⁶⁸

Raaflaub highlights several other incidents mentioned in “stories and off-hand remarks told within the epic narrative”⁶⁹ where an essentially private dispute has led to full-scale war between communities. Raaflaub sees this as evidence of the “*polis* getting involved through its leadership.”⁷⁰ However, the last example Raaflaub provides to consolidate his position suggests the opposite conclusion. In the Trojan

⁶⁷The number of soldiers on the Greek side is deduced by a series of estimates based on the ‘Catalogue of Ships’ scene of Book Two. The number of Trojans is given as 50,000 (*Il.* VIII, 562-563). Van Wees, H., *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History*, J.C. Gieben, Amsterdam, 1992, pp.269-271.

⁶⁸The escalation of a private dispute to a public war is common, and stories of past wars that are recounted in the pages of the *Iliad* follow the same pattern. Even Hercules, a greater warrior than any in the *Iliad*, was incapable of single-handedly solving his disputes. The story of the first sacking of Troy is told in fragments in the *Iliad* (XXI, 441-457; XX, 145-8; V, 639-42, 648-51). Laomedon, the ruler of Troy, offended Poseidon and Apollo, who sent an amphibious monster to terrorise the Trojans. Laomedon offered his immortal horses as a reward to anyone who could kill the monster. Hercules killed the monster, but Laomedon refused to part with his horses. The mighty Hercules leaves to recruit an army and returns to destroy the entire city. Odysseus’ single-handedly slaughtering of the suitors at the end of the *Odyssey* - he is only aided by his son and two loyal servants - is unique in the Homeric epics. Cf. Van Wees, *Status Warriors*, *op. cit.*, pp.193-194.

⁶⁹ Raaflaub, K., “Politics and Interstate Relations in the World of the Early Greek *Poleis*,” *Antichon*, Vol. 31, 1997, pp.1-27, p.2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

assembly, Antenor proposes that Paris give up Helen and offer compensation to appease the Greeks. Paris refuses to give up his wife “and Priam, taking the side of his son, ends the debate. Whatever the assembled Trojans think of it – according to a later report on this debate, the majority supports Antenor’s proposal – they yield to the determination of the *basileus*’ family.”⁷¹ The assembly is powerless in decisions that affect the entire community because those assembled are not citizens. They do not equally exchange ideas that determine the direction of the community. “The assembly of the army in the *Iliad* and the peaceful assembly of people in the *Odyssey* are mute assemblies in which the crowd receives announcements and instructions.”⁷² An assembly is not called on Ithaca for over twenty years in Odysseus’ absence because the prince was not there to give orders. The crowds in the assemblies do not form an embryonic body of citizens, i.e. a *polis*, but rather a subservient feudal class of serfs. The existence of the assemblies testifies to the existence of communal life in the Homeric epics, but it does not testify to the existence of a *polis*. Decisions are often arrived at without consideration of the common good and are enforced by force rather than persuasion.

Patroclus’ funeral games as a microcosm of the *polis*

Dean Hammer, like Simone Weil, has argued that “Homer is engaged in a more general critique of the nature of authority upon which Agamemnon premises his leadership.”⁷³ For Hammer, the *Iliad* offers an “alternative model of leadership”⁷⁴ which is “a constructed polis in which leadership is called upon to cut through kinship lines ... [and where there is] a demos consisting no longer of subjects, but not yet citizens who have some allegiance to a political community that extends beyond their immediate household, kin, or other corporate loyalties.”⁷⁵ Thus Patroclus’ funeral games serve, for Hammer, as a microcosm of a functioning, if still embryonic, *polis*. A long argument symbolically linking aspects of Patroclus’ funeral to the mechanisms

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁷² Strasburger, “The Sociology of Homeric Epics,” *op .cit.*, p.50.

⁷³ Hammer, D., “Who Shall Readily Obey? Authority and Politics in the *Iliad*,” *Phoenix*, 51:1, 1997, pp.1-24, p.4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.14-15.

of power in a *polis* culminates in the proposition that the higher *agathos* Achilles achieves as mediator and distributor of prizes at the funeral games can be seen as a model for the community as a whole.

Where before Achilles stood apart from the community, watching their slaughter, here he occupies a role within the community: initially, that of distributor of the prizes, ultimately, that of arbiter of dispute. There is no small irony here as the mediating role Achilles will assume stands in contrast to (and with the rise of the *polis* will usurp) the private vendetta carried out by Achilles on Patroclus' behalf.⁷⁶

The greatest flaw in Hammer's argument that the funeral games offer an alternative form of governance is that Achilles uses the same mechanisms of power as Agamemnon: he simply uses these methods in a better manner. Achilles shows generosity and magnanimity of spirit where Agamemnon did not. On the whole, Achilles solves disputes between the competitors by providing more prizes so that nobody misses out.

The distribution of prizes at the chariot race, the most prestigious event at Patroclus' funeral games, only comes to resemble the finishing order after long discussions and various challenges. Conflict in the chariot race is only avoided by mutual sycophancy and ensuring everyone receives a prize. Achilles feels sorry for Eumelus when he sees him come in last and offers him a prize: "The best driver of the lot has come in last. Let us give him a prize, as it is only fair. Make it second, for of course Diomedes takes first." (*Il.* XXIII, 536-538). Only Antilochus, who came second, questions this wisdom, telling Achilles, "I will not give up this mare. Anyone who cares to try can come and fight me for her with their fists" (XXIII, 553-554). The inability to resolve problems by means other than violence becomes yet again apparent. The newly wise and tranquil Achilles averts the confrontation, and gives Agamemnon a lesson in leadership, with a display of generosity. He provides a supplementary prize for Eumelus.⁷⁷ As within the earlier assemblies, behaviour and

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁷⁷ There is a further conflict between Menelaus and Antilochus that is only resolved when Antilochus recognises the order of seniority and asks to be forgiven for the rashness of youth, and voluntarily gives

action are determined by a “heroic-code” that is ambiguous and frequently violated and unable to resolve disputes other than through arbitrary force and violence. Achilles’ assembly only papers over these chasms of procedure with supplementary prizes. The competing members of the games remain subjects at the mercy of the tyrant’s generosity.

Agamemnon proceeds to win the javelin-throwing contest without picking up a javelin. Achilles gives him the prize:

My lord Agamemnon, we know how much you excel the rest of us and that in throwing the spear no-one can compete with your prowess. Accept this prize and take it with you to the hollow ships (890-893).

In view of the results of the funeral games, it is difficult to see how the funeral games can be seen as a model for a higher political order, that is, a *polis*. There is no justice when the man who came last in the chariot race is given second prize on account of being the “best man,” *aristos* (501). There is indeed no true competitive spirit when Agamemnon wins without competing.

The field of sporting endeavour could provide a microcosm of a functioning *polis*, but in the *Iliad* it does not. In a sporting event all participants are equal before the law, as they should be in a *polis*. Personal interests are secondary to the laws of the game that, in a race, dictate that the person finishing first is the winner who is consequently considered the fastest runner. At Patroclus’ funeral games, the laws of the events are subordinated to personal status, perceived merit and other extraneous considerations. Achilles’ “mediating role” in distributing the prizes is performed in total disregard of the laws of the sport. As Achilles acts in “defiance of written codes” (*Statesman*, 301c), his leadership at the funeral games must, according to Plato’s categorisation of political regimes, fall into the category of tyranny.

up the mare and offers compensation if required. Menelaus, too, shows himself to be generous when he not only accepts Antilochus’ apology, but also allows him to keep the mare.

Conflict is never far from the surface at the funeral games and is only avoided by the good will and generosity of Achilles and the competitors. Achilles demonstrates he has greater political and social nous by handling the conflicts with greater aplomb than Agamemnon may have mustered, but the structures and institutions through which power is exercised have not changed. The “alternative model of leadership” demonstrated by Achilles is that of a good tyrant, but a tyrant nonetheless.

Finkelberg takes the disjuncture between the sporting results and the distribution of prizes at the games as evidence against Adkins’ interpretation of the dominance of the competitive virtues in Homeric society. She argues that “a society in which a contest can be won without even a slight effort on the part of the winner cannot be considered the embodiment of a competitive society.”⁷⁸ The funeral games serve to highlight the failings of the heroic code on its own standard of measurement, but they do not disprove that Homeric society envisages itself as one that embodies the competitive virtues. The funeral games show that the ideals of heroes are not always matched by their everyday reality. The most honoured is not always the one who displays the traits of the hero to the greatest extent. Participants at the funeral games re-live the qualities that made the departed hero a great warrior: strength, speed and skill. The funeral games could be a purified celebration of Homeric ideals, a competition where a man can win material rewards and honour by proving himself to “excel above all other”. Unlike some other human activities, a clear order of excellence based purely on ability can be established on the sporting field. In the events at the funeral games, however, the ability of the contestants seems to have had little influence in determining the best driver or the best javelin thrower. Rather than a model for a new form of political leadership, the funeral games in fact emphasise the cronyism, corruption and abuse of power that is predominant in the epics. Honours and rewards flow to the best connected princes and not the best athletes. The loosely defined “heroic code” that is meant to hold Homeric communities together is conceived and adhered to in an *ad hoc* manner even in the sterile and uncomplicated environment of sporting endeavours. When the complexities and intrigues of life are added, the “heroic code” reveals itself as a shambles.

⁷⁸ Finkelberg, M., “*Time and Arete in Homer*,” *op. cit.*, p.17.

Even Finley's assertion that the heroic code is a mutually beneficial exchange of muscle-power from the hero in return for special rewards and privileges from the community of lesser mortals does not always eventuate on the evidence provided by the role of some princes, especially Paris. When lamenting the death of Hector, Priam accuses his surviving sons of being "a despicable crew – yes rascals all of you, heroes of dance, who win laurels on the ball-room floor when you are not engaged in robbing your own people of their sheep and kids" (*Il.* XXIV, 259-62). Paris and his brothers are not stealing sheep from local peasants at the dead of night, but they receive the same special cuts of meat as Hector without being as effective on the battle field, without, it would seem, even trying particularly hard either. Paris highlights the contradiction between the ideal and the reality of the "heroic code." Paris is a prince and hence in the class of heroes and enjoys the same relative luxury as Hector, but he does not possess any heroic qualities. The people must show him the same princely deference and the community is obliged to risk everything to protect him. Yet clearly Paris is a parasite and an exploiter, he lives off the community without making a payment in return. This does not deny him privilege and power in the community of Troy.

As the position of prince is gained by birth rather than merit and struggle, it is clearly unrealistic to believe that all princes will meet the strenuous conditions of heroism. A prince retains power and privilege even in cases where he does not reciprocate by making his muscle power available to the community. Paris is not unique among the princes in choosing not to participate in battle.⁷⁹ Hesiod, struggling to explain the same natural superiority of the ruling class, suggested that princes received the gift of eloquence from the Muses at birth. Yet in *Days and Works*, Hesiod, like Homer, presents a picture of a society in which force, rather than

⁷⁹Paris is an interesting case. He is depicted as a hopeless warrior in the *Iliad*, yet we know that he had the ability and courage to steal Menelaus' wife, and we also know that Paris will kill Achilles. The only attempt by Homer to deal with this paradox is Hector's rebuke of Paris who is afraid to fight Menelaus in single combat. "Paris, you pretty boy, you woman struck seducer; why were you ever born? ... How the long-haired Achaeans must laugh when they see us make a champion of a prince because of his good looks, forgetting that he has no strength of mind, no courage. When I look at you today, can you be the man, I ask, who picked yourself a crew of friends, sailed overseas in your much travelled ships, hobnobbed with foreigners and carried off a beautiful woman from a distant and warlike family ... But the Trojans are too soft. Otherwise you would have been stoned to death long ago for the evil you have done" (*Il.* III, 34-57).

eloquence and wisdom, is used to settle disputes (35-41, 202-64). Paris is honoured just the same as other princes because

as a criterion of status, warriorhood is of ideological rather than real importance. Martial excellence is simply *ascribed* to princes and rulers in order to justify their high status. The poet depicts the heroes as doing their utmost to live up to this ideal, but ... he is drawing on an image of real-life princes who do not actually try particularly hard to prove themselves great fighters.⁸⁰

Princes, like Paris, maintain power despite failing to live up to ascribed heroic standards on the battlefield. A prince's power over his community is ideally contingent on his heroism. The reality of the Homeric epics demonstrates that a prince holds power only so long as he, or his entourage, has the physical strength to maintain it. It is pure personal power sometimes exercised benevolently in a manner that benefits all in the community and other times not. Personal power maintained by might and exercised in self-interest cannot coexist with a *polis*, embryonic or otherwise. The basis of power in the epics is in fact antithetical to a *polis*.

Conclusion

The Homeric heroes live in a society that does not display the most elementary foundations of a *polis*. Leadership is personal and motivated by private gain. Whilst there may be a conception of the common good, indicating the presence of a community, the dictates of the common good are ignored when they clash with personal interest signifying the absence of a *polis*. The heroes cannot serve as models for emulation for readers of the epics who live in a *polis*. The heroes have no experience of living in a *polis*, and hence cannot serve as models for citizens. Furthermore, the heroes' greatness is founded on qualities that are antithetical to citizenship.

The negative side to the totality of Homeric man's decision-making processes and action is the extremity of behaviour it breeds. Homeric man is an all or nothing proposition. He cannot, and it would seem does not want to, find the path of

⁸⁰Van Wees, *Status Warriors*, *op. cit.*, p.99.

moderation. Caution and reason are continually rejected in the *Iliad*. When caution and reason are advised by an inferior – Polydamas or Thersites – it is simply silenced by threats or actual violence. Achilles, too, in a moment of calm reason, can see that there must be more to life than risking death (*Il.* IX, 402-409), yet his later actions betray these words. Achilles, the extremist, is not a unique individual alienated from his community, as he is so often portrayed, but merely the exemplary product of his society. Achilles, the hero *par excellence*, is guided by extreme individualism.

As will be discussed in later chapters, when the benefits of communal life are recognised, an ethical system that promotes extreme individualism at any price can no longer rightly be held up as the supreme example of human life. Consequently, the Homeric heroes fail as models of emulation that aim to breed heroes, that is, men who excel in a vast range of human activities. They nonetheless remain seductive models capable of guiding men in their personal affairs. Plato would recast heroism in a manner that was far more compatible with communal living and consequently would largely displace “Homer as the educator of Greece” (*Republic*, 606e), and more broadly, of the Western world.

PART II

PLATO:

**Extending Heroism to
the Political**

CHAPTER 3

Platonic Man: The philosopher as a new hero

Socrates was a man of unparalleled intelligence and wisdom. He could resist temptation, endure any hardship and show great courage in the face of death and on the battlefield. Socrates is a truly heroic figure because he consistently acts above the human norm in all the activities he undertakes. For Socrates and Plato, a life of such heroic dimensions could only be lived by one who led a philosophical life. The philosophical life is founded on resisting the temptations and desires of the body and following the dictates of intellectual contemplation. “I am,” Socrates claimed, “not only now but always a man who follows nothing but the *logos* (reasoning)” (*Crito* 46b). Following reason allows a man to gain knowledge and become a philosopher. Plato’s vicious and spiteful attack on the Homeric heroes at the juncture of the second and third books of the *Republic* indicates that the philosopher is a new type of hero, one who is as an alternative model to Achilles and the Homeric heroes. Whereas the Homeric hero achieved his heroic status primarily through his actions, the philosopher reaches heroic peaks through contemplation and cerebral control of visceral desires.

Socrates is the embodiment of this new type of heroism. He epitomises the philosophic life and becomes an example of what those who follow in his footsteps can hope to achieve. This chapter argues that philosophical heroism is more grandiose than its Homeric predecessor. The rewards for living by one’s reason are immense. According to the famous analogy of the cave, unenlightened men, those without knowledge, are like prisoners enchained in a cave who see shadows of wooden puppets cast on a wall and mistake this distorted reality for the truth. The philosopher escapes the cave and sees the world for what it really is. A man who grasps the truth about what exists leads a superior life to one who remains ignorant of basic realities because he acts in full knowledge of the world and what he does in it. Knowledge enables heroic thought, action and behaviour because the philosophical existence transforms man from a deaf, blind, dumb and stupid monkey into a hearing, seeing, thinking and knowing being. Philosophical insight translates directly to excellence in any human endeavour, including areas beyond the reach of the Homeric

hero, especially, as will be seen in the following chapter, the realm of political activity in the *polis*.

Plato's model of heroism is also more exclusive in terms of who may strive for heroism. This might seem a surprising proposition as Homer confines heroism to a male aristocracy of birth. Amongst the Homeric aristocracy only those who choose to engage the risks of adventure and battle and have the faculties to excel in such condition achieve heroism. Such men were necessarily an elite, but an individual hero's humanity is never transcended. Philosophical heroism is limited to a male aristocracy of *merit*. The men sufficiently meritorious to attempt the educational ascent to philosophy are drawn from an elite of highly talented individuals. Despite claims of gender equality amongst the ruling class of Guardians in the *Republic*, women are excluded from Platonic heroism. To reach heroism in the Platonic scheme, I argue, requires a man to expunge all female characteristics in a manner that Homer would not have contemplated because he did not establish exclusive psychological distinctions between the sexes. For Homer, only a man could be heroic, but men were not defined in opposition to women. For Plato, a hero was free of supposedly female qualities.

Once men reach the status of philosopher they are so vastly different and superior to ordinary men that they are on the precipice of transcending the human condition. Plato conceives of man as composed of a human, worldly component, his body and its concomitant emotional desires, and a divine component, his mind or *psychē*. I argue that this basic dualism holds true even in the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic*. True knowledge can only be obtained when the *psychē* contemplates metaphysical reality unhindered by visceral desires. In the *Phaedo*, the *telos* of the philosopher is only achieved when the *psychē* is perfectly and completely liberated from the constraints of the body. Only in death is the *psychē* free to reunite with the realm of the divine and the eternal in which it partakes.

Platonic Tripartition, introduced in the *Republic*, divides the soul into three elements: the reason, spirit and appetite. The change to tripartition in the *Republic* is motivated by a desire to make the aim of philosophy to reduce the influence of the body rather than eliminate it entirely, enabling philosophy to become a doctrine for

human excellence on this earth. In the *Republic*, Plato attempts to find a role for the body. Whilst the political organisation and institutions of the *Republic* are the most utopian of Plato's dialogues, the proposed method of achieving heroic excellence is potentially the most feasible and practical. Tripartition, however, is founded on an epistemological and educational system centred on achieving knowledge of the Form of the Good. The Good and the doctrine of the mean of the late dialogues are metaphysical concepts that exist outside the human realm. Human fulfilment continues to rest upon the soul grasping realities that exist beyond and above human experience.

The Platonic hero gleams more sublimely than his Homeric predecessor. Plato offers a more exalted image of what man could be. Whereas Homer offered models of men who were god-like, Plato offers a model of emulation that rests on isolating the divine component of man whilst still entrapped in a human body. Homer presents godly men, whilst Plato presents manly gods. Rousseau when presenting his model of individual excellence will pull back from the Platonic heights and settle somewhere between Homer and Plato.

Socrates: An heroic life

Socrates is the model for the type of hero a man will become if he leads the philosophical life. Socrates' intellectual excellence is well known. He possesses an intellect so brilliant that on hearing him speak Alcibiades becomes "ecstatic." "My heart pounds and tears flood from my eyes under the spell of his words." Alcibiades has seen "the same effect on plenty of others" (*Symposium* 215d).¹ Amongst the "others" who have been equally moved by Socrates' words is the rather more composed figure of John Stuart Mill who describes him as:

This acknowledged master of all the eminent thinkers who have since lived – whose fame, still growing after more than two thousand years, all but outweighs the whole remainder of the names which make his native city illustrious.²

¹All translations of the *Symposium* are from *Symposium*, trans. Waterfield, R., Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1994.

²Mill, J.S., "On Liberty, [1859]" *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Williams, G., Everyman, J.M. Dent, London, 1993, p.92.

Socrates has remained a model of intellectual aspiration for almost two and a half millennia. Rousseau wished to see himself, and he was often considered by others, as Socrates' kindred spirit, with the important proviso, noted by LeDuc-Fayette, that any intellectual was considered a "Socrates" in the eighteenth century.³

Aside from the brilliance of his mind, Socrates was equally celebrated by his contemporaries for his physical prowess and endurance. The stereotype of the intellectual as a pale weakling who is utterly useless when it comes to practical action is not new. Plato actively counteracts the perceived limitations of "half-dead" philosophers (*Phaedo* 64b) with his presentation of Socrates. Socrates is a hardened man who has the ability to survive the harsh Athenian winter without shoes or a winter coat. Whilst on campaign in Potidaea, Alcibiades is witness to Socrates' physical endurance:

the cold was so terribly bitter that everyone was either staying inside or, if they did venture out, they wore an incredible amount of clothing, put shoes on, and then wrapped pieces of felt and sheepskin around their feet. Socrates, however, went out in this weather wearing only the outdoor cloak he'd usually worn earlier in the campaign as well, and without anything on his feet; but he still made his way through the ice more easily than the rest of us with our covered feet (*Symp.* 220a-b).

Socrates could withstand the rigours of nature as effectively as Homer's warriors or Rousseau's natural men. His barefooted expeditions into the snow will later resonate in Nietzsche's overman. Zarathustra's reaction to winter encapsulates the ethos of the overman. "I do not pray, like the pampered, to the potbellied fire idol. ... A simple bed warms me more than a rich one."⁴ One can imagine Zarathustra taking cold baths, rolling in the snow, and refusing to sleep with more than one blanket. It is easy to dismiss the anecdotal images offered by Nietzsche, and indeed Socrates, and consider that walking barefooted in the snow when one could slip on some shoes is foolhardy rather than virtuous. However, for all the thinkers examined

³ "En siècle socratique tout esprit avancé est un Socrate!" LeDuc-Fayette, D., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et le mythe de l'antiquité*, Librairie Philosophique, Paris, 1974, p.37.

⁴Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1884], in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. Kaufmann, W.,

in this thesis, as for Nietzsche, a man must overcome hardship in order to find greatness. Hardship is both a trial and an achievement in itself. Through hardship, man rejects immediate pleasures and easy solutions in order to achieve something greater. The first hardships to be dealt with are physical.

The austerity of Homeric society had not been deliberately imposed or artificially created. The people of the *Iliad* lived a very harsh life and Homer faithfully described this life. Socrates' physical endurance and robustness is possible because he voluntarily exposed himself to an austere environment that rejected all luxury. For Plato, and later Rousseau, an austere environment must be manipulated. All superfluous luxuries that make men soft and weak are banished from Plato's *Republic*. There is no alcohol, fine food or fine clothes because "elaborate music, we found, produces indiscipline, and elaborate food produces disease" (*Republic* 404e). The zeal with which Plato expels any refinement is captured by an extraordinary reference he makes to seasoning food. "Homer, I think, never mentions seasonings. Indeed, even the ordinary athlete knows that if he is to be fit he must keep off them" (*Rep.* 404c). This seemingly inconsequential passage of the *Republic* that bans rosemary on lamb is indicative of the overall austerity that Plato is aiming for in order to avoid the weakening of man. Amazingly, Rousseau also adopts the belief that seasoning meat is an unnecessary pampering of men that makes them soft.⁵

Socrates was also renowned for his ability to remain impervious to both alcohol and Alcibiades' physical charms. Despite being "more than a match for everyone" when it came to drinking, "no one has ever seen Socrates drunk" (*Symp.* 220a). The great man remains sober because he has overcome the limitations of his body. Nietzsche was in awe of Socrates who, the last man standing, "left the Symposium at daybreak, the last of the revellers, to begin a new day."⁶ Nietzsche draws a parallel between Socrates calmly leaving the Symposium and his acceptance

Penguin Books, London, 1977, pp.103-339, p.285.

⁵ *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, n. I, p.149.

⁶ Nietzsche, F., [1871] *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, tr. Whiteside, S, ed. M. Tanner, Penguin Books, 1993, § 13, p.67. Cf. "Now that he had put them to sleep, Socrates got up and left. ... [He] went to the Lyceum for a wash, spent the day as he would any other, and then went home to sleep in the evening." Thus ends the *Symposium* (223d).

of death. On his deathbed, whilst his companions break down into passionate fits of weeping, Socrates drains the hemlock “quite calmly and with no sign of distaste” (*Phaedo* 117c). Socrates, as he triumphed over other physical adversities, overcame the fear of death.

Further proving his manhood, Socrates was acclaimed as a brave and efficient hoplite (Greek foot soldier). Alcibiades recounts how Socrates led a small company back to safety after the Athenian collapse at Delion in 424 BC.⁷ At the moment of disaster he

calmly looked around at both his friends and enemies, all while making it clear even from a distance that if anyone were to attack such a man as he, he would put up considerable resistance. Accordingly, he made his way back without harm along with his comrades. Indeed, in war the enemy will not dare press home their attack against men such as this; instead they go after the ones who are fleeing away in complete disorder (*Symp.* 221b).

The phalanx, typical of Greek battle formations in the fifth century BC, consisted of men huddled together in formation offering each other protection and pushing each other forward. The actual battle would have required courage, nerve and discipline in the face of extreme mental and physical distress. In the chaos of the earlier Homeric battles a weaker man could have shirked the issue, kept his head low and hoped no one would notice him, but this was impossible for the hoplite in formation. If an army turned to flee, they would be slaughtered, and if they broke ranks at the front, the enemy could enter into the phalanx and wreak havoc.⁸ Socrates, through his bravery and resolve when his fellow Athenians turned to flee, saved not only his own life, but also those of his immediate companions.

Socrates is an heroic man who excels at all human endeavours he undertakes. It is not through chance of birth or luck that he achieves this level of all-round excellence. It is because he lives a well-balanced life. The correct balance is

⁷ The same story is retold by Plutarch at *Moralia* 581d.

⁸ Victor Hanson estimates the fatality rate in phalanx battles was about 14% for the defeated and about 5% for the victor. Hanson, V., *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1989, pp.27-40.

obtained through knowledge. Socrates is the equal of the Homeric heroes in the virile virtues of courage, prowess on the battlefield and physical endurance. Plato himself is reputed to have been a prize-winning wrestler.⁹ Socrates' excellence, however, is comprehensive as it can be systematically applied to any activity. A dialogue like the *Cratylus* is motivated, at least in part, by the desire to show that Socrates has better credentials as an etymologist than the "so-called" experts in the field. The *Phaedrus* demonstrates that knowledge is an essential prerequisite to good oratory. Indeed, there is no field of endeavour, including endeavours as yet unknown, in which real knowledge will not enable action that is superior to ordinary men. Socrates could, like Odysseus, boast that he carves meat, pours wine and builds a better fire than any other mortal, but Socrates chooses to devote his life to higher pursuits. Socrates excels at all noble endeavours. He could have appealed to the Athenians' base instincts with a dazzling display of sophistry in the *Apology* to avoid a guilty sentence to the charge of impiety and corrupting the youth, but he chooses not to. Socrates and Plato separate "knowing and doing."¹⁰ Arendt considers that the Homeric world of action is marked by an uninterrupted continuity between thought and action. In my treatment of Homer, I added emotion to Arendt's continuum. Homer's heroes were perhaps the high point of the realm of action. By separating knowing and action, the philosopher can choose the actions to which he can apply his knowledge.

Socratic Intellectualism: the primacy of knowledge

For Plato and Socrates, heroic status depended on intellectual reasoning, which is undertaken by the *psychē*. The Greek *psychē* is usually translated as soul, but in a discussion on Platonic philosophy the meaning of soul should be understood to include the mind, "the seat of consciousness, intelligence and individual personality."¹¹ The human body is at best an impediment and at worst an insurmountable obstacle in the *psychē*'s search for truth. "In fact we are convinced that if we are ever to have pure knowledge of anything, we must get rid of the body and contemplate things in themselves with the soul in isolation" (*Phaedo* 66e). The

⁹ Spivey, N., "Saturday Review Essay," *Guardian Saturday*, London, July 31, 2004, p.4.

¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, p.225.

¹¹ Corcoran, P., "Therapeutic Self-Disclosure: The Talking Cure," *Disclosures*, [Eds. Corcoran, P. & Spencer, V.] Ashgate, Hants, 2000, pp.118-148, p.138.

telos, end goal, for man in all the Platonic dialogues is achieved when the divine *psychē*, the seat of reason, is favoured over the mortal body, the seat of passion, appetite and emotions. The human *telos* of isolating and favouring the *psychē* is true of the early Socratic dialogues as it is of the middle and late dialogues (Cf. *Gorgias* 492e-493a; *Phaedo* 66a-67a; *Republic* 500c-d, 517c-d, 590d; *Statesman* 309c; *Laws* 716 c-d, 792 c-d).¹²

Knowledge (*epistēmē*), on Platonic understanding, is an entirely separate activity and a distinct possession to belief or opinion (*doxa*). Unlike the modern, Cartesian view that knowledge is a state of correct belief arrived at through a

¹² The actual date of composition of the dialogues remains speculative, but Vlastos breaks the dialogues into the following periods:

Early works: *Apology*, *Charmides*, *Crito*, *Euthyphro*, *Hippias Minor*, *Gorgias*, *Ion*, *Laches*, *Protagoras*, *Republic I*.

Transitional: *Euthydemus*, *Hippias Major*, *Lysis*, *Menexenus*, *Meno*

Middle works: *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Parmenides*, *Republic II-X*, *Symposium*, *Theaetetus*.

Late Works: *Critias*, *Laws*, *Philebus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*.

Vlastos, G., *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp.46-7. Aside from the controversial splitting of the *Republic* into two, Vlastos' proposed order is largely consistent with Connford's in "The Athenian Philosophical Schools," *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. VI, eds Bury, J., Cook, S., Adcock, F., Cambridge University Press, 1927, p.311.

The consistent *telos* in all the supposedly different Platonic periods leads me to take a "complementarity" approach to the Socratic Question. The Socratic Question asks whether there is any clear distinction between Platonic and Socratic thought. The "developmental" position (also called the revisionist, interpretative or doctrinal approach) argues that in the early dialogues Plato simply reports Socrates' views verbatim and only comes to impose his own thought in the middle and late dialogues. Vlastos' *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, the most influential recent developmentalist work, lists ten major differences between the historical Socrates of the early dialogues and the Platonic Socrates of the middle dialogues (pp.47-9). Many of these views are, according to Vlastos, irreconcilable. Cf. Halverson, J., "Plato, the Athenian Stranger," *Arethusa*, 30(1), 1997, pp.75-102. Halverson provides a thorough background to the twentieth century debate on the Socratic Question before arguing that Plato finally reveals himself as the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*.

The term "complementarity" has been adopted to signify a less dogmatic approach to the thematic compatibility of the Platonic dialogues than that taken by Paul Shorey in *The Unity of Plato's Thought*, [1904] Garland Press, New York, 1980. The *telos* of favouring the divine *psychē* remains consistent, but the pragmatic details on how this should be achieved vary across the different Platonic periods. There is a development in Plato's use of the theory of Forms as an explanative tool, and the tripartition of the *Republic* and its political application are an expansion of the subject matter of the early Socratic dialogues. These differences, however, can be attributed to a "development in Plato's self-confidence" and the natural enrichment of ideas, rather than a marked change between the thought of Socrates and Plato, as argued by "developmentalists." Annas, J., *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1999, p.26. Having adopted a complementarity approach, I make no attempt to clearly demark Socratic and Platonic thought. On the distinction between unitarian and complementarity see Schofield, M., "The Disappearance of the Philosopher King," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, 1997, eds. Cleary, J., & Gurtler, G., Brill, Leiden, Boston, Cologne, 1999, pp.213-241.

reduction of doubt, Plato maintains that knowledge does not exist in degrees. Knowledge is eternal, unchanging and metaphysical.¹³ Understanding (*noēsis*) is only possible when a man allows his *psychē* to contemplate the metaphysical realm of knowledge. Human excellence, and claims to heroism, will only occur with the predominance of the *psychē*. These central claims of the middle dialogues are clearly established in the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism found in the early dialogues. The need for the divine element of man, the *psychē*, to contemplate the metaphysical realm in order to achieve heroism suggests that man must escape his human body and transcend the human condition to become heroic.

Socratic Intellectualism maintains that all virtue is intellectual. Virtuous action is correct action and only knowledge enables a man to discover what is correct. Hence, the famous dictum that knowledge is virtue. Socrates interrogates men who believe themselves to be wise and exposes the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in their thought. He demonstrates that their claims to expertise are based on false pretensions and sham knowledge.¹⁴ In the ensuing intellectual confusion (*aporia*), the interlocutor, it is hoped, will convert to the Socratic view that true knowledge is the key to correct understanding and consequently superior action. True knowledge, arrived at by intellectual contemplation unhindered by visceral desire, allows a man to live well.¹⁵ The reward for mastering the craft of living well is the

¹³ The distinction between Platonic and modern Cartesian views of knowledge is Julia Annas'. Annas, J., *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981, p.200. The distinction between knowledge and belief in Plato's work is most clearly made in the analogies of the divided line and the cave (*Rep.* 509d-513e; 514a-521c).

¹⁴ Micheal Stokes argues that in the early dialogues Socrates' arguments are largely *ad hominem*. They are designed to demonstrate that certain types of person, usually those blinded by their own sense of self worth, are incapable of obtaining knowledge. Stokes, M., *Plato's Socratic Conversations: Drama and Dialectic in Three Dialogues*, Athlone, London, 1986.

¹⁵ The Socratic project is to develop the *technē* (science or craft) of living well. Because no one desires to be miserable (*Meno* 76a-78a), "it is not living, but living well, that we should treat as supremely important" (*Crito* 48b). As Lovibond explains, "Socrates insists that before we can decide the truth of any proposition about courage, piety, friendship, or personal merit in general, we need to be able to say *what each of these things is in itself* (*Meno* 71b); and that the expected reward for answering such questions correctly is that the answers will contribute to the formation of a body of moral theory, that is, a resource for dealing with the larger question of 'how to live' (*Gorgias* 500c; *Rep.* 352d) as coherently and reliably as a *techinkos* (expert) proceeds in his own field." Lovibond, S., "Plato's Theory of Mind," *Psychology*, ed. Everson, S., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 35-55, p.38. Italics are in original.

Living well enables the attainment of *eudaimonia*. Annas claims that Socrates and Plato are pioneering an eudomonic ethical framework that would later be developed by Aristotle and the Stoics. Annas,

ability to act above the human norm in all activities, becoming, in essence, more like Socrates.

Socrates does not claim firm knowledge of what occurs upon death because to do so would be to claim, as knowledge, an opinion of what cannot be known. This is the very offence he has spent his life combating. Nothing can be known of the Hall of Hades, because, as Socrates explains, no one has been and returned.

For let me tell you this, gentlemen, that to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not; it is to think that one knows what one does not know. ... this is the nature of my superiority over the rest of mankind; and if I were to be wiser than my neighbour in any respect, it would be in this: that not possessing any real knowledge of what awaits us in Hades, I am also conscious that I do not possess it (*Apology* 29a-b).

In the *Meno*, *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*, moral error is attributed to intellectual failure.¹⁶ Socrates wishes to demonstrate that people do not act wickedly in order to secure pleasure because “nobody desires what is evil, for what else is unhappiness but desiring evil things and getting them?” (*Meno* 78a). Everyone aims for the Good. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates relies on a popular hedonistic argument to prove that identifying any conception of the “Good” requires knowledge. Everyone is aware that immediate pleasures can lead to evils, and vice a versa. Nightly good food and excessive drink brings immediate pleasure, but in the long run will lead to an unhealthy constitution. Conversely, the immediate pain of an operation or the taste of unsavoury medicine will lead to the good of a healthy constitution (*Prot.* 353c-354b). If evil and pain, and pleasure and good, are recognised as synonymous couplets, the absurdity of the popular truism that a man does evil because he is overcome by desire for pleasure becomes clear. It is reduced to the illogical statement

Platonic Ethics, *op. cit.*, p.45. *Eudaimonia* is usually translated as ‘happiness’, but it is something beyond happiness because it is not a feeling of contentment or enjoyment but that which is most satisfying and desirable in life. According to Ostenfeld, *eudaimonia* is a “stop word” because it ends an argument because no one would refuse “the best, the finest and the most pleasurable thing of all.” (*Ethics* I.viii) Ostenfeld, E., “*Eudaimonia* in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Essays on Plato’s Republic*,” ed. Ostenfeld, E., Aarhus University Press, 1998, pp.73-84, p.73.

¹⁶ On the interrelationship between *Meno*, *Gorgias* and *Protagoras* see: Segvic, H., “No One Errs Willingly: The Meaning of Socratic Intellectualism,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* XIX, Winter 2000, pp.1-46.

that a man does evil (pain) because he is overcome by good (pleasure).¹⁷ As Taylor summarises:

All he [Socrates] wants to show is that even from the point of view of the persons who mistake “popular goodness” for genuine goodness, it is not a paradox to say that goodness is knowledge of some sort; the Hedonist is a “rationalist” in his ethics, though his rationalism may not be of the right kind.¹⁸

The problem, as Socrates sees it, is not that people knowingly act against their best interests in order to satisfy immediate desire, but their ignorance of proper scales of measurement. Socrates is convinced that “no one is willingly morally bad or does willingly wrong actions” (*Prot.* 345e). The common person’s wrongdoing should not be attributed to moral depravity, but simply incorrect knowledge (*Prot.* 357d-e). Only knowledge will give people the ability to measure moral and ethical dilemmas correctly (*Prot.* 357-358). Socrates’ Athenian comrades who fled at Delion did not do so because they were morally bad. Their cowardice resulted from incorrectly considering the results of their actions. Socrates knew the consequences and stood firm to face the enemy. Knowledge enabled Socrates to act with heroic virtue. The key to virtuous and heroic action is liberating the *psychē* from the constraints of the body so that it may access true knowledge. This is in stark contrast to the heroism of the Homeric characters who achieved greatness by transparently acting in reaction to their emotions and desires.

¹⁷ This position is revisited in the *Gorgias* (466a-469a) where Socrates counters the claim made by Polus that the tyrant is the most powerful and hence happiest person in the city. Polus believes the power and consequent happiness of tyrants lie in their ability to do as they please because they can “put to death any man they will, and deprive them of their fortunes and banish whomsoever it seems best” (466b). For Socrates, the tyrant, like any other man, does not will what he is doing but the consequences of an act (468c). If a tyrant kills it is not because he wants to kill but because he wants to stay in power. As the tyrant does not know the consequences of killing a particular or perceived enemy, he commits numerous futile acts that are unjust. Polus earlier agreed with Socrates that power is “something good for its possessor” (466b). As an unjust murder is indisputably evil, Polus is forced into Socrates’ conclusion that the tyrant is the person who should be the least envied because he desires evil things and gets them. Desiring evil things is, for Plato, the inevitable outcome of the tyrant (*Cf., Republic*, 562a-580c)

¹⁸ Taylor, A., *Plato: The Man and his Work* [1926], University Paper Backs, Methuen, London, 1960, p.182.

Androgynous virtue

Having established the importance of liberating the *psychē* in order for it to obtain knowledge, Plato is corralled into specifying that the *psychē* is a non-corporeal entity. The *psychē* is divorced from any physical human attributes such as baldness, height or gender. Consequently, there is no difference between the potential of a male or female soul because virtue is universal and genderless (cf Plato *Meno* 71e, *Republic* 452e; Xenophon, *Symposium* II, 9).¹⁹ In the *Republic*, therefore, women can partake in public life and other activities that Aristotle, and the ancient Greeks generally, reserved for men. The political leaders of the *Republic*, the Guardians, can be either men or women.

There is therefore no function in society which is peculiar to woman as woman and man as man; natural abilities are similarly distributed in each sex, and it is natural for women to share all the occupations with men, though in all women will be the weaker partner (455 e). [And accordingly] men and women have the same natural capacity for Guardianship (456b). ... They must play their part in war and in all other duties of a Guardian, which will be their sole occupation; only as they are the weaker sex, we must give them a lighter share of the duties than men (457a).

Women, in these passages of Book V, are considered the weaker partner in this context uniquely due to their inferior physical strength. Theoretically, therefore, it should be possible for women to ascend to the same level and ideal of heroism as men in Plato's scheme. This position was, however, unpalatable for an Ancient Greek, even one as progressive and radical as Plato. In practice, heroism remains, for Socrates and Plato, a uniquely male possibility. Indeed, the philosophic hero is celebrated for his manliness.

Plato's frequent use of analogy and metaphors reveals that he believes women were incapable of discipline. The importance of discipline in obtaining knowledge is demonstrated in the analogy of the cave which shows how the fog lifts from one's eyes and the truth is revealed when the Forms are recognised. The brightest inhabitants of the cave are those that are best at interpreting the shadows cast on the

¹⁹ Aristotle criticises the historical Socrates for maintaining that the temperance, courage and justice of a man and a woman are the same (*Politics* I.13 1260a).

walls, but this false intelligence will not aid true enlightenment. “The journey out of the cave is a highly disciplined event in which patience and endurance are more valuable than ordinary perceptiveness.”²⁰ Patience, endurance and determination are the result of discipline. Discipline is founded on the dominance of reason over the visceral impulses. Throughout the *Republic* and the rest of the Platonic corpus, women are presented as possessing stereotypical female traits: lacking self-control, and being soft, weak, emotional and generally hysterical. All these are captured in the passage forbidding the guardians to take roles as actors because representing another person (i.e. acting) will weaken the character of persons doing the acting by destroying their unity of purpose and function:

we will not allow them [guardians] to take the parts of women, young or old (for they are men [*neoi*]), nor to represent them abusing their husbands or presumptuously quarrelling with heaven, when they imagine themselves happy, or crying and complaining in misfortune. Far less can we permit representation of women in sickness or love or child-birth (*Rep.* 395d).²¹

In direct contradiction to the explicit instruction from Book V that guardians could be men or women, the guardians are described as young men (*neoi*) throughout Books II and III of the *Republic* (388d, 390a, 391b, 402c, 404a). In Plato’s view, women, possibly because of the visceral process of child bearing, are incapable of subduing the body’s impetuses. Unable to escape the pull of the body, women are incapable of gaining knowledge. Plato links irrationality and its attendant emotional associations to the female sex.

For Susan Okin, Plato’s proposal – which is never implemented – to open the public sphere to women in the *Republic* is motivated by his need to overcome the practical problem of what women should do once the family and hence the female’s traditional role has been abolished for the sake of unity within the *polis*.²² By

²⁰ Simmons J., *Vision and Spirit: An Essay on Plato’s Warrior Class*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1988, p.10.

²¹ *Cf.* On a discussion on cowardice Socrates claims: “And don’t you think that there’s something low and mean about plundering a corpse, and a kind of feminine small-mindedness in treating the body as an enemy ... It’s rather like the dog’s habit of snarling at the stones thrown at it, but clear of the person who’s throwing them” (*Rep.* 469 d).

²² Okin, S., *Women in Western Political Thought*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1979,

eliminating the family in the name of unity, Plato abolished women's traditional role as it was conceived in Greek society and would be succinctly articulated by Aristotle. Without the family structure, women were without a role or occupation. Plato could not leave the women idle because idle individuals are the worst and most dangerous beings, as they are the most likely to cause chaos and disharmony. Rousseau saw that Plato, "[h]aving dispensed with the individual family in his system of government, and not knowing any longer what to do with his women, finds himself forced to turn them into men."²³ Okin argues convincingly that Rousseau's interpretation has not been surpassed.²⁴ Jean Elshtain and, to a lesser extent, Diana Coole, see Plato as more detrimental than Aristotle in the continued silencing of women in the social and political spheres.²⁵ For Elshtain, Plato's "misogyny"²⁶ led him to deny the possibility of female virtue, something even Aristotle did not do, by subsuming the female into the category of man. She believes women suffer disproportionately at the denial of difference between the sexes because they are less able to escape biological imperatives. For Elshtain, Aristotle would confine female virtue to a small corner, but Plato had denied women the possibility of any distinctive virtues, whilst in practice excluding them from the supposedly androgynous virtue based on knowledge. It would appear that Plato found the idea of men and women obtaining an equal virtue as completely unpalatable. Whilst Plato conceived of the *psychē* in such a manner that it had to be genderless, he could not countenance the idea of men and women obtaining equal virtue. Consequently, Plato excluded women from obtaining true knowledge. Whilst Guardianship was theoretically open to females, it appears that, in practice, Plato did not think that any women would become Guardians.

pp.28-50. Okin's position will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter.

²³ *Emile, O.C*, Vol.4, pp.699-700, Bloom, p.362, cited in Okin pp.37-38.

²⁴ Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought, op. cit.*, pp.30-40.

²⁵ Coole derides Plato for not extending gender equality beyond the guardian class, a tiny minority, in the *Republic*, and presumably keeping the Athenian division of labour within the masses of the lower classes. In essence, Coole believes Plato did not go far enough to be taken as a proto-feminist. The *Republic*, however, says little on any aspect of the lower classes. The *Republic* does not propose itself as a blueprint for society, and can accordingly remain silent on the activities of the mass of its citizens. To criticise this silence is to have somewhat missed the purpose the Platonic Socrates sets out to achieve when he constructs his republic 'in speech'. Coole, D., *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*, Wheatsheaf Books, L. Rienner Publishers, Sussex, 1988; Elshtain, J., B., *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* [1981], [Second Edition] Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1993, p.37.

²⁶ Elshtain, J., B., *Public Man, Private Woman, op cit.*, p.37.

Emotions, for Plato and Socrates, are seen as a particularly feminine trait that must be eliminated if virtue and human fulfilment are to be realised. The model of manly sobriety and courage is provided by Socrates on his deathbed. Socrates' companions break down into passionate fits of weeping on seeing him drain the hemlock "quite calmly and with no sign of distaste" (*Phaedo* 117c). Socrates chastises his friends: "Really ... what a way to behave! Why, that was my main reason for sending away the women, to prevent this sort of disturbance ... Calm yourselves and try to be brave" (*Phaedo* 117e). This scene and the values it exhorts are well portrayed in David's painting, *Socrates' Death Bed*. A white haired Socrates with a suspiciously young and athletic body sits bolt up-right with his finger in the air forming a perfect right angle with his other hand, no doubt emphasising some final point, whilst the younger companions are slumped over and effeminately overcome with emotion.²⁷

Aside from giving Socrates as an example of manly restraint, Plato specifically criticises the emotional and effeminate behaviour of the Homeric heroes, most famously at the junction of the second and third books of the *Republic*. The Homeric epics could only be considered suitable reading material for the Republic's citizens if the scenes of lamenting and disorderly Homeric heroes were removed because, as Socrates explains:

if our young men take passages like these seriously and don't simply laugh at their absurdity, they are hardly likely to think this sort of thing unworthy of them as men, or to try to control the temptation to similar words and actions. They will feel no shame and show no endurance, but break into complaints and laments at the slightest provocation (*Rep.* 388d).

The coupling of a loss of emotional control with effeminate, and consequently inappropriate, behaviour for men, certainly precedes Socrates. Sophocles' Ajax

²⁷ The most important painter of the French Revolution, Jacques Louis David exemplified quiet, thoughtful characters, the 'soldat calme.' David joined heroism and calm to moral beauty, and in his famous *Oath of the Horatii* (1784) opposed these manly qualities to female weakness and passion: "the Horatians, fathers and sons, swear to sacrifice themselves for Rome while women sit by, cry, and lament." Mosse, G., *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.47

apologises, in a way that Homer's heroes never would, for his emotional outbursts. Tecemassa, Ajax's wife, tells how Ajax "always used to explain that such laments were the mark of a cowardly and dejected man" (*Ajax* 320-321).²⁸ Ajax himself believes "a woman is indeed a creature most prone to wail," (*Ajax* 580) but that for him it is embarrassing. Plato, however, goes further than any of his contemporaries and sets a new standard for what is an appropriate display of emotion, insisting that those who descend to such behaviour are "no better than women" (*Apology* 35b).²⁹ A generation later, Zoilos of Amphipolis, Aristotle's contemporary, exemplifies the change of attitude which Plato had brought about. He says of Achilles' grief on hearing of the death of Patroclus, "[h]e should have known in advance that everyone runs the same risk in war ... This sort of excessive grieving is effeminate." Then with the triple blow of the worst insults available to the Greeks, he concludes by accusing Achilles of behaving like a woman, a foreigner, and a slave: "Not even a barbarian nurse would behave like that" (Zoilos, FGrH., H71, F11).³⁰

Thus Plato effectively couples irrationality to the female sex. The philosopher's superiority as a human being and aspiration to heroic status is founded on his rationality. The philosopher must, therefore, eliminate all female characteristics from his persona. The heroic philosopher is not only a man, but a man who is free from any traces of femininity. This is confirmed throughout the *Republic* by Socrates' extensive use of martial, and to his ancient Greek audience intrinsically masculine, analogies to describe the philosopher's search for truth: making an assault in battle (534c); hunting and tracking (432b-d); swimming against huge waves (453d, 457b-d, 472a-473); wrestling (554b, 583d); and mountain climbing (445c).³¹

²⁸ Sophocles, *Ajax*, ed. & trans. Garvie, A., Aris & Phillips, Wiltshire, 1998.

²⁹ Cf. Again Plato takes a swipe at the Homeric heroes' emotional theatrics. When confronted with private loss, "we pride ourselves if we are able to keep quiet and master our grief, for we think it is the manly thing to do and that the behaviour we appraised before [Homeric man's lamenting and chest-beating] is womanish" (*Republic*, 605d-e).

³⁰ Cited in Van Wees, H., "A Brief History of Tears," *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity*, eds. Foxhall, L., & Salmon, J., Routledge, 1998, pp.10-53, p.46.

³¹ Hobbs, A., *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness and the Impersonal Good*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, p.244. Plato does, in contrast, use weaving as a metaphor for making institutions and practising statesmanship in his later dialogues, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.

Seeking eternity: philosophy as an activity for gods

The philosopher is striving to isolate that which is divine and a part of God. Unlike the Homeric hero who hopes to become god-like, the philosopher aims to become a God. The objective of philosophy is to isolate the *psychē*, so that it can access the knowledge required to reach for heroic heights without being pulled down by the mundane demands and desires of the body. On Platonic understanding, the *psychē* is the eternal and divine component of man.

Prior to Plato, the word *psychē* predominantly meant the breath of life, i.e. the distinction between a dead and living body.³² The older meaning of *psychē* is captured in the Homeric epics. When a man dies his *psychē* (soul/life force) departs to the underworld where it lives on in a non-conscious, zombie-like state. The soul and the body are dependent on each other for meaningful life. For Socrates, death is “actually nothing but the separation of two things from each other, the soul (*psychē*) and the body” (*Gorgias*, 524b). The soul will live on with its consciousness intact.³³ The *psychē* is the mind, or the true-self. It is divine and eternal. The differing views of Homer and Socrates on the nature of the human soul lead to differing views of man’s objectives. By Arendt’s reading, whilst Homer sought a substitute for immortality, Socrates and Plato “discovered the eternal as the true centre of strictly metaphysical thought.”³⁴ According to Arendt, eternity is not everlasting existence, but the contemplation of that which defies time and spatial constrictions.³⁵ Mortal human life on this earth is defined by time and spatial constrictions because it has a beginning and an end, and man is trapped within a spatial container, the body.

³² *Psychē* was also used to mean high spirits or courage. Socrates’ appropriates it for a new and original purpose.” Lovibond, “Plato’s Theory of Mind,” *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³³ Socrates only wants to show why he thinks that the immortality of the soul is likely (*Apology* 29a-c, 38c-42a, cf *Phaedo*). This is hypothetical rather than demonstrative, and the language of the dialogues bears this out. Socrates believes (*oimen*), and hopes (*elpidzo*) that his thesis is correct. Cf. Reeve, C., *Socrates in the “Apology”: An essay on Plato’s “Apology” of Socrates*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, 1989, pp. 69-73, 180-183; Patterson, R., *Plato on Immortality*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 1965, p.15; Taylor, A., *Plato: The Man and his Work*, *op. cit.*, pp.176-177.

³⁴ Arendt, H., *The Human Condition* [1958], The University of Chicago Press, [Second Ed.] intro. Canovan, M., 1998, p.20. Taylor attributes the doctrine of the *vita contemplativa* to the Pythagoreans. Taylor, *Plato*, *op. cit.*, p.182. This discovery applies particularly well to Socrates, who did not write anything, because as soon as one writes, one is leaving a trace and partaking in the search for immortality.

³⁵ Arendt, *op. cit.*, p.18.

Seeking eternity is seeking an end point for humanity that is beyond the confines of mortal existence and is indicative of Plato's desire to create men who can only become heroic by escaping the limitations of humanity. This stands in stark contrast to the Homeric heroes who stretched human limitations rather than attempt to break free of them.

Oddly, Arendt does not refer to the *Symposium* where Diomita's speech bears out the distinction between the immortal and the eternal and confirms the primacy that Plato places on eternity. There is a clear hierarchical ascent in Diomita's speech from those seeking different forms of "pre-Socratic" immortality to those who can achieve eternity. Animals seek immortality by creating offspring (207c-d) and men who are "physically pregnant" covet immortality like animals by desperately trying to reproduce (208e). Other men seek immortality through their "status seeking" that will hopefully outlive them. "They long to 'store up fame immortal forever'" (208c). The quotation is apparently of unknown origins,³⁶ but it is very Homeric in its intentions for *kleos*, and Achilles is mentioned five lines later. "Mentally pregnant men" such as poets and craftsmen seek immortality by creating objects that will out-live them (209a). The highest amongst those seeking immortality are those who teach others. This applies equally to the older man individually teaching a boy in a homosexual relationship, the teaching of many by Homer or Hesiod through their songs, and the teaching accomplished by Lycurgus and Solon through their legal codes in Sparta and Athens respectively. Teaching lends immortality to an idea and consequently "the off-spring of this relationship are particularly attractive and are closer to immortality than ordinary children" (209b-c). All of these endeavours, however, remain in the rubric of what Arendt considered the pre-Socratic aspiration for immortality. Indeed, Diomita sees them as inferior substitutes for the real goal of eternity.

For Plato, as expressed through Diomita's speech, the final ascent to eternity is only open to the person who can open his mind to the unchanging and stable world that surrounds him. In the middle dialogues this is the higher realm of the Forms. The non-spatial and non-temporal aspect of the Forms is a clear indication that they are in the sphere of what Arendt labelled the eternal. In the *Symposium*, the peak of

³⁶ *Symposium*, trans. Waterfield, note, p.88.

the ascent is the real and ever-lasting Form of Beauty. What the man who gazes upon the Form of Beauty will see is “in the first place, eternal; it doesn’t come to be or cease to be, and it doesn’t increase or diminish” (211a). The Form of Beauty exists eternally regardless of whether anyone ever actually sees it. Diomita continues that the proper way to undertake this “ascent” is to:

use the things of the world as rungs in a ladder. You start by loving one attractive body and then step up to two; from there you move on to physical beauty in general, from there to the beauty of people’s activities, from there to the beauty of intellectual endeavour, which is no more and no less than the study of that beauty, so that you finally recognise true beauty (212c).

The language of ascent to the divine resonates in the analogy of the cave where the reluctant prisoners are “forcibly dragged up the steep rocky ascent” (515e) to “visit the upper world”(517a). When their journey of “upward progress” (517b) is complete, they “long to remain among higher things” (517c). The ascent in the *Republic* culminates in the vision of goodness (511b-c). In the *Timaeus*, the *psychē* is believed to reside “in the top part of our body. It raises us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven” (*Tim.* 90a). This belief is repeated in the *Laws*: “nothing born of earth [the body] is to be honoured more than what comes from heaven” (727e).

Only a person who eliminates the pull of the body can hope to contemplate the climb to the higher realm of the eternal. The ascent to knowledge of the eternal and consequent heroic virtue is an ascent away from the mortal condition. The philosopher strives for this transcendence. He is a man

who pursues truth by applying his pure unadulterated thought to the pure unadulterated object, cutting himself off as much as possible from his eyes and ears and virtually all the rest of his body, as an impediment which if present, prevents the soul from attaining to the truth and clear thinking (*Phaedo* 66a).

Only in death, the ultimate separation of body and soul, is the philosopher’s aim of isolating the *psychē* achieved. In the *Gorgias* (492e), Socrates quotes Euripides’ lines to the effect that to be alive is to be dead. Socrates infers from this that “our bodies

(*soma*) are our tombs (*sema*)” (493a).³⁷ Life, for Plato, is merely a preparation for the super-life which exists beyond human existence. The philosophical life becomes a “rehearsal for death (*meletē thanatou*)” (*Phaedo* 66b, 67e, 69c, 81a).³⁸ Human life surrounded by shadows in the cave as described in Book VII of the *Republic* can equally be interpreted as a metaphor for life as death. Taylor aligns the striving for the eternal (in the *Phaedo*) to the mysticism of Christianity:

The underlying ideas of both conceptions are that there is a supreme good for man which, from its very nature, cannot be enjoyed in “this life.” The best life is therefore one which is directed to fitting ourselves for the full fruition of this “eternal” good beyond the limits of our temporal existence.³⁹

The *psychē* is eternal and divine and upon death will rejoin with divinity, “the place from which our souls were born” (*Timaeus* 90a). Plato’s view of the soul rejoining with the divine is analogous to a Hindu or Buddhist soul finding nirvana and absorption into Brahman (Hindu) or absolute blessedness (Buddhist). The *telos* of the philosopher in the *Phaedo* becomes assimilation or re-incorporation with God. Assimilation with God is a more exalted state than being god-like because it implies a person’s escape from this world literally to become a part of God. The Homeric hero was a man who fulfilled human potential and achieved what was beyond other men, but he remained fully human. He called himself god-like because he acted like his anthropomorphised gods, but he would never claim divinity because he remained mortal and did not possess supernatural powers such as throwing thunderbolts. The philosopher aims to share with the gods in the contemplation of the eternal.⁴⁰

The *Phaedo*’s otherworldly aims are repeated in a digression in the *Theaetetus*, which is generally considered to be a later work. In the *Theaetetus*,

³⁷ In the *Phaedo* the best life is upon death because the *psychē* is “freed from the chains of the body” (*Phaedo* 67a).

³⁸ Taylor calls it a “dying life.” Taylor, *Plato, op. cit.*, p.182.

³⁹ Taylor, *Plato, op. cit.*, pp.181-182.

⁴⁰ The dual and competing aims in the Platonic dialogues of becoming God-like and becoming assimilated with God are a relatively ignored issue in Platonic scholarship. One notable exception is Annas, J. *Platonic Ethics, op. cit.*, Chapter 3, “Becoming Like God,” pp. 52-71.

becoming virtuous is to escape from the mix of good and evil that characterises human life:

It is not possible, Theodorus, that evil should be destroyed – for there must always be something opposed to good; nor is it possible that it should have its seat in heaven. But it must inevitably haunt human life, and prowl about on this earth. That is why a man should make all haste to escape from earth to heaven; and escape means becoming as like God as possible; and a man becomes like God when he becomes just and pure, with understanding (*Theaetetus* 176a-b).

In the *Theaetetus* there is a clear aim of unworldliness, assimilation with God. The same implication can be drawn from the myth of cosmic reversal in the *Statesman* (269a-274d). According to this myth, there are periods when human beings are cared and provided for by the gods. The Eleatic Stranger, who leads the discussion in the *Statesman*, ponders whether people were actually happier in this ‘garden of Eden’ period and concludes that if they devoted themselves to philosophy and wisdom they would have been infinitely happier; but if they wasted their spare time on idle pleasures of the body, the reverse would be true (272b-d). The complete superiority of the divine component of man, his *psychē*, over the corporeal and material component “is as strongly emphasised in the *Statesman* myth as it is anywhere in Plato.”⁴¹

In both the *Statesman* myth and the passage quoted from the *Theaetetus* all that is good comes from God, the divine, and all that is evil comes from the mortal component of man. The aim of man is to escape evil by reassimilating himself with God. This can only occur perfectly upon death. The best life is one that attempts to approximate this reassimilation of the *psychē* and God, whilst the *psychē* is still trapped in its human container. A theory of human fulfilment that advocates death as the ultimate human state is limited in its utility for men living on this earth. If there is no constructive role for the body in the pursuit of human excellence, the aims of Platonic philosophy are in danger of exceeding the heroic and becoming quixotic. Such a doctrine of heroism mitigates against esteeming action because the best thing a philosopher can do is to die or wait for death. Indeed, Socrates is reduced to putting

⁴¹ Dorter, K., *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1994, p.195.

forward feeble arguments against suicide. He objects to suicide on the grounds that men are mere possessions of the gods and a person does not want to annoy the gods and be punished for this annoyance by taking his or her life against the gods' intent (*Phaedo* 62b-c). An analogy Tarrant uses in his introduction is that a slave promised freedom tomorrow would not annoy his master by escaping today. Man on earth is in a similar position *vis à vis* the gods as the slave is to his master and a wise man will obey his superiors, especially if they are as powerful as the gods.⁴² A theory of heroism reliant on transcending the human condition loses its appeal to a wider audience who consider it both unfeasible and of little utility to them.

The *Republic* elaborates the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism because it offers a detailed defence of the benefits and practical purposes of justice in this life. Living well and displaying heroic virtue no longer rests on eliminating the body because the tripartite division of the *psychē* recognises the distinction between biological necessities that must be met in order to obtain survival and superfluous luxuries. In the *Republic*, the body and its concomitant desires only need to be controlled rather than eliminated in order for a man to achieve the heroic peaks of excellence and well-being. Consequently, the human *telos* becomes an approximation of the divine rather than assimilation with the divine. Approximation of the divine, becoming god-like, is a highly difficult and unlikely achievement, but it is feasible for human beings in this life and on this world. Tripartition is an attempt on Plato's behalf to enter into the "Homeric paradigm" of heroism considered as improbable but not unfeasible, and heroism as a guide for action. Ultimately, Plato's attempt to render the aim of philosophical heroism practical and useful for human life on this earth fails, on my reading, because the metaphysical foundation that underpins tripartition, the knowledge of the Forms and especially knowledge of the Form of the Good, is dependent on human transcendence. Plato himself, as will be seen in the next chapter, sees the philosopher's purpose and utility on this earth as a political leader of men.

⁴² Tarrant, H., "An Introduction to the *Phaedo*," *The Last Days of Socrates*, Penguin Books, 1993, pp. 95-108, pp.98-99.

Tripartite psychology: heroism within human reach

Tripartition refines the soul-body/reason-desire dichotomy put forward in doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism and the *Phaedo*. The aim becomes balancing the soul correctly so that it may achieve psychic harmony and live well while still entrapped in a human body. The tripartite psychology of the *Republic* considers the *psychē* as being composed of three components: the rational part (*logistikon*), the spirited part (*thumoeides*) and the appetitive part (*epithumētikon*). The soul is analogous to the state that is equally composed of three different classes: the Guardians who are the rulers; the Auxiliaries who enforce the Guardians' rule and defend the *Republic*; and the rest of the citizens. A state and an individual are considered to be just when reason (Guardians), in conjunction with the spirit (Auxiliaries), controls and subdues desires and urges (Masses), and each class "does its own job and minds its own business" (*Rep.* 433a). The aim is no longer to escape this earth, but to live on it justly. Justice pays because the just man lives in spiritual harmony, whilst the unjust man suffers disharmony and conflict by allowing his life to be ruled by distorted principles. Furthermore, tripartition enables everyone to realise an ideal at some level. Whilst the ideal of the *Phaedo* can only be held as an objective by very few, the objective of tripartition is open to all citizens. Not everyone can reach the heroic heights of philosophy and access true knowledge, but everyone can live a well-balanced life and stick to his own.⁴³ The ordinary citizen can avoid greed and devoting his life to physical pleasure, which will allow him to lead a more fulfilling life even if he does not reach the philosophical heights of true justice.

Tripartition, however, appears to be an *ad hoc* creation that is contrived to meet the demands of the individual as analogous to the state. Tripartition "seems to stem immediately from the tripartition of the State in *Republic* IV; the 'soldier class' in a state may make sense, but the equivalent 'spirited element' in a soul is seen as an oddity."⁴⁴ The 'spirited element' in the individual merely enforces reason or aids the appetite in corrupting reason, but carries out no unique function of its own and remains auxiliary (supplementary) to either reason or appetite. Contrary to the

⁴³ Klosko, G., *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Methuen, New York and London, 1986, pp.92-99, 108-113.

⁴⁴ Robinson, T., *Plato's Psychology* [1970], [Second Ed.] University of Toronto Press, 1995, pp.39-46.

developmental assertion – that maintains a development in the different Platonic periods – tripartition does not undermine the Socratic dictum that knowledge is sufficient for virtue of the soul because it relies on the same fundamental dualism of reason and desire.⁴⁵ Tripartition largely disappears in the later dialogues.⁴⁶ Even in the *Republic*, Plato reverts to a dualistic division of the soul (602c-605c).

The idea that Plato would introduce tripartition as an *ad hoc* measure sits uncomfortably with classicists. An enormous body of speculative literature has sought possible motivations behind tripartition. Angela Hobbs argues that its inclusion is intended to counter Calicles' claim that philosophers are effeminate wimps by making the image of the philosophical life more appealing to young men brought up on bed-time stories of Achilles, Ajax and the other Homeric heroes' manly deeds. The *thymos* (spirit) seeks honour and empowers *andreia* (courage and bravery). Both *thymos* and *andreia* were considered intrinsically masculine by the ancient Greeks.⁴⁷ Plato had to overcome the commonly held perception that the pursuit of philosophy by young men into "adulthood would be paramount to abrogating their manhood."⁴⁸ Plato simultaneously wants to hold to the Socratic ideal of a single virtue and imbue philosophy with virile activity. As Hobbs insists, "it is hard to escape the conclusion that Plato has not properly thought out the implications of inter-weaving these dual ideals."⁴⁹ Making philosophy manly further emphasises Plato's attempt to make philosophy appear useful in this earthly life because it accentuates the potential for action.

⁴⁵ Vlastos maintains that in the *Republic* reason alone is no longer capable of guiding people in the right direction. A man dying of thirst might well drink polluted water even though he knows it is not a good thing because without the force of his spirit his reason lacks the strength to enforce its decisions. Vlastos, *Socrates, op. cit.*, pp.82-91. Other less extreme developmentalists, like Klosko, simply see tripartition as a more sophisticated version of Socratic Intellectualism.

⁴⁶ Robinson dismisses vast tracks of Platonic scholarship with the claim that there is no evidence of tripartition in later Platonic dialogues. Q.v. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology, op. cit.*, p.39. The analogy of the two horses and the charioteer of the *Phaedrus* (246a, 253d-257b) restates the tripartition of the *Republic*. Cf Lovibond, "Plato's Theory of Mind," *op. cit.*, pp.50-55. The *Timeaus* would seem initially to reaffirm tripartition: "There are as we have said many times now, three distinct types of soul that reside within us" (89e), but the following discussion is not dependent on tripartition (89e-90e).

⁴⁷ Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero, op. cit., passim*, esp. pp. 68-74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.247.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.248.

Scaling the heights of philosophy is not presented as an easy task in the *Republic*. Socrates stresses the difficulties in finding men with the right attributes to attempt the ascension to philosophy (*Rep.* 502d-503e). Once people with the potential to become philosophers are found, they must undertake a 40-year educational program before they are considered ready for the final ascent to the status of philosopher. It is difficult to see how anyone could survive the continual selective testing, but it is feasible. Plato's aim is to make superlative human action, heroism, a feasible *telos* for a soul living in a human container. Transcendence from this world is, therefore, presented as no longer being a pre-condition of achieving fulfilment of the human condition.

The psychology of the *Republic* is largely unique in the Platonic corpus, but it is inextricably linked to the common epistemology of knowledge being uniquely accessible to the *psychē* and human excellence being dependent on knowledge. The rational part of the soul can only dominate the appetitive part when it has gained knowledge of the Forms. Knowledge of the Forms is entirely dependent on knowledge of the metaphysical and hypothetical Form of the Good which remains as elusive for man as grasping eternity.

Theory of Forms

The theory of Forms describes the real and eternal object for the philosopher's knowledge. Socratic Intellectualism maintains that real knowledge is a master key that can open any door on heroic action. Other than the fact that it is only accessible to the *psychē*, knowledge is never clearly defined in the early dialogues. Socrates' confused interlocutor may well cry out in despair: "I can see now that I require knowledge, but, oh Socrates, knowledge of what?" This seemingly obvious question is not answered in the early dialogues. The Socratic dictum that knowledge is virtue is unsatisfactory. It offers little more than an instruction to think before acting. This is sound, but hardly philosophically profound advice. The path to heroic excellence is set out far more clearly once the theory of Forms is included into the Platonic canon because the objects of knowledge are identified. The theory of Forms clarifies the *telos* of the philosopher and it also clarifies why the action and behaviour of a philosopher will be superior.

The theory of Forms states that everything that exists in the sensible and visible world of everyday existence is merely an ephemeral and subjective reflection of a pure form of the same object (or action) in a higher realm accessible only to the mind (*psychē*). Objects in this higher realm are known as *eidē*, usually translated as Forms or Ideas. The Forms are metaphysical entities that are absolute, timeless, unchanging and pure. Upon seeing the Forms a man sees the world for what it really is. His new found conceptual clarity enables all-round excellence.

The theory of Forms, however, is deeply flawed, as Plato himself points out in the *Parmenides* (130b-135c). The *Parmenides* depicts a youthful Socrates expounding the theory of Forms to Parmenides, who proceeds to demolish it only to conclude “on the other hand if anyone ... does not admit the existence of forms of things or mark off a Form under which each individual thing is classed, he will not have anything on which to fix his thoughts ... and in this way he will utterly destroy the power of discourse” (135b-c). Parmenides’ criticism of the Forms centres on the difference between Forms as immanent and transcendent, and the proliferation of Forms.⁵⁰

Aristotle also noted the distinction in the use of Forms as immanent or transcendent.⁵¹ A Form is considered immanent if it exists within its reflected object on the earthly world, that is to say the Form of Beauty exists within a beautiful thing. It is transcendent if it exists beyond the earthly world. In other words, the Form of Beauty is different to anything that may be called beautiful in this world.⁵² If the

⁵⁰ For a full account of the *Parmenides* see Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato, op. cit.*, pp.19-67; and Allen, R., *Plato’s Parmenides*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983. Dorter supports the view that the theory is redeemable.

⁵¹ The terminology used to indicate this difference is not always consistent in the literature. Santas refers to Forms as “ideal exemplars” (transcendent) or “properties” (immanent). Santas, G., “Aristotle’s Criticism of Plato’s Form of the Good: Ethics without Metaphysics?” *Philosophical Papers*, XVIII(2), 1989, pp.137-160, p.140.

⁵² Universal definitions, Aristotle explains, can safely be attributed to Socrates but Socrates “did not make universals or definitions exist apart; they [the Platonists], however, gave them a separate existence, and this was the kind of thing they called Ideas” (*Metaphysics* 1078b30-31, cf. 987a29-b14, 1086a30-b13). Following Aristotle, many scholars have argued from a developmentalist approach and view the Forms in the early Socratic dialogues as immanent and the Forms in the middle dialogues as transcendent. For the developmental view Cf. Burnet, J., *Greek Philosophy: Part 1 Thales to Plato*, Macmillan, London, 1914, p.165; Allen, R., *Plato’s Euthyphro and The Earlier Theory of Forms*, Humanities Press, New York, 1970, pp.145-154; Vlastos, *Socrates, op. cit.*, and Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*,

Forms are considered immanent, they partake in the objects and actions of this imperfect world and would thus be easier for imperfect humans to grasp, but it then becomes impossible to sustain the philosopher's claim to infallible knowledge based on knowledge of the Forms. The Forms are simply a tool of categorisation, something akin to a system of biological classification to provide a philosophical justification for the axiomatic observation: "We are in the habit of postulating one unique Idea for each plurality of objects to which we apply a common name" (*Rep.* 596a). Socrates' interlocutors in the early dialogues willingly accept this and Vlastos believes that it is a fallacy to call this a theory. "[Socrates'] belief in their reality [Forms] is no more evidence of his having such a theory than is the man in the street's belief in the reality of physical objects evidence of his having a theory of physical objects."⁵³

Where the Forms are transcendent they "are the best objects of their kind or have a superlative goodness of kind."⁵⁴ The Form of Beauty as it is described in the *Symposium* is a clear example of a transcendent Form.

Nor will his vision of the beautiful take the form of a face, or of hands, or of anything that is of the flesh. It will be neither words, nor knowledge, nor something that exists in something else, such as a living creature, or the earth, or the heavens, or anything that is – but subsisting of itself and by itself in eternal oneness, while every lovely thing partakes of it in such sort that, however much the parts wax and

op. cit. Unitarian scholars have argued that immanence and transcendence are complementary. Thus, in the earlier dialogues, the Forms are nowhere and everywhere, that is, immanent and transcendent: "Where amongst all the beautiful things in the world, is beauty? Everywhere and nowhere: everywhere, because wherever a beautiful thing is, there is beauty, as a property which it has and by which it is beautiful; nowhere, because we cannot point to one of them and say, "There it is!" as if it were identical with or confined to that one instance." Perl, E., "The Presence of Paradigm: Immanence and Transcendence in Plato's Theory of Forms," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 53(2), December 1999, p.339. Downloaded www.web1.infotrac.galegroup.com 11pages. Cf. Robinson, R. & Denniston, J., "Plato," [org. pub. in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, 1949] *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays* [1971], ed. Vlastos, G., University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1978, pp.7-15, pp. 9-10.

⁵³ Vlastos, *Socrates, op. cit.*, p.59. Whilst Vlastos is correct in asserting the lack of a fully expounded metaphysical theory regarding the Forms in the Socratic dialogues, the theory of Forms, as it is expounded in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, is used as a tool to perfect the realisation of the Socratic insistence on the predominance of the cerebral knowledge over visceral desire. The theory of Forms in the *Republic* provides a metaphysical and epistemological basis for the Socratic ideal that heroic virtue will only come through knowledge.

⁵⁴ Santas, "Aristotle's Criticism," *op. cit.*, p.143.

wane, it will be neither more or less, but still the same inviolable whole
(*Symp.* 211a-b).

Beauty in the sensible world is a qualified, subjective and changeable quality. Those intoxicated by the ephemeral and superficial will seek examples of beauty whilst lovers of wisdom seek the Form of Beauty. Lovers of wisdom view Beauty as something that exists beyond the human world. The Form of Beauty, like any Form, is an unworldly object, and in Parmenides' words, "must by strict necessity be unknowable to human nature" (135b).

Whether the Forms are seen as immanent or transcendent, or both, the Forms proliferate until there are more Forms than objects in the sensible world. If one takes the formula A, B and C are Y, because A, B and C all share y-ness and apply it to Tom, Dick and Harry the problems become clear. Tom (A), Dick (B) and Harry(C) are all men (Y). If the Forms are immanent, an endless multiplication of Forms occurs because the Form of Man exists in everyman. Furthermore, if Tom is just and good-looking there exists within Tom the Form of Beauty and the Form of Justice. The theory of Forms has not helped or simplified our understanding of Tom, nor has Tom helped our understanding of the Forms. In fact, Tom has gone from a single object in the sensible world to an endless multiplication of Forms in the intelligible world. This proliferation occurs even if the Forms are considered transcendent because in order to grasp the good-looking and just Tom, the philosopher needs to grasp the Forms of Man, Beauty and Justice. As an explanatory tool that supposedly empowers the philosopher to act with clear and distinct knowledge, the theory of Forms has been widely regarded as a failure.⁵⁵ This suggests that the theory of Forms maintains that true knowledge is metaphysical and can only be grasped by a person whose *psychē* has transcended the human body. It appears that supreme human action, heroism, remains as dependent on human transcendence in the *Republic* where

⁵⁵ Many attempts have been made to overcome the difficulty of the proliferation of Forms. Julia Annas has argued that only objects that conjure "contradictions of perception" require Forms. Annas uses the finger example from *Rep.* 523b-524b to clarify her point. Experience tells us that a finger is a finger and cannot be a non-finger (thumbs excluded), so a finger can become an object of knowledge without being a Form. "Contradictions of perception" arise when we consider whether the finger is small or large, ugly or beautiful etc. Annas' argument lacks conviction because, as she readily admits, "Plato never explicitly says this, and some of the things he says elsewhere seem to go against it." Annas, J., *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, *op. cit.*, pp 191-212, p.223.

it is founded on tripartition that is, in turn, founded on the theory of Forms as it was in Socratic Intellectualism.

The unworldly nature of the Forms becomes more starkly apparent when Plato reveals that one can only know the Forms when the Form of the Good is known (508d-e). The conceptual clarity that empowers heroic action and behaviour is dependent on the Good, which consequently is the object of all human aspiration (505d-e). The Good, however, is poorly explained and beyond human reach.

“Plato’s Good was from the start ridiculed for its obscurity,”⁵⁶ beginning with Glaucon who is bemused and confused by Socrates’ exposition (509 c). Socrates himself seems embarrassed by the theory of the Good, declining to give a direct explanation of what the Good actually is because it lies beyond his powers of definition and beyond the powers of his listeners’ understanding. The scant and oblique description of the Good only covers five Stephanus pages, the first two of which consist of a prologue on how difficult and incomplete the description is (504e-509d). In contrast to the defence of justice that covers Books IV and V of the *Republic*, the Good is applied neither to a person nor the *polis*. Socrates falls back on an analogy: the Good is like the sun in the sensible world. The sun “causes the processes of generation, growth and nourishment, without itself being such a process,” and likewise, the Good “may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their existence and reality; yet it is not itself identical with reality, but is beyond reality, and superior to it in dignity and power” (*Rep.* 508e-509a). The sun provides light which enables the eye to see objects in the sensible world, and likewise, the Form of the Good provides the illumination needed for the *psychē* to view the Forms of the intelligible world. The Good is responsible for all existence, and consequently everything is in some degree good. Everything partakes in the Good because, for example, to be beautiful something must partake in the Form of Beauty which, like all Forms, partakes in the Form of the Good.⁵⁷ A man becomes a philosopher in the *Republic* only when he grasps the Good, much like the philosopher of the early dialogues who must grasp

⁵⁶ Annas, *Platonic Ethics. op. cit.*, p.96.

⁵⁷ Santas, “Artistotle’s Criticism,” *op. cit.*, esp. p.143.

knowledge of the eternal. Both the eternal and the Good exist beyond human understanding.

Aristotle criticises Plato for making the philosopher's objective something that exists outside of the realm of human existence. For Aristotle, this has two damaging consequences. First, it is impossible to reach, and second, if it were reached, it would not be of much use in giving guidance to human affairs (*Ethics* I.vi, 1096b).⁵⁸ Many scholars, modern and ancient, have concurred with Aristotle's criticism that the Good cannot be reached. The upward journey to knowledge in the *Republic* relies on a level of mysticism, as the Forms generally, and the Form of the Good especially, remain articles of faith. The Good is "outside and perhaps even beyond intellection."⁵⁹ It can only be reached by revelation. The mystical nature of the journey to the Good contradicts Plato's emphasis on logical progression towards true knowledge.

The similarities between Plato's Good and the Christian conception of God have been well noted, and indeed, moved Nietzsche to deride Christianity as Platonism for the masses.⁶⁰ The Good in Plato is the entity that gives all other things goodness and in fact their very existence, yet it exists outside and beyond all earthly considerations. A measure of the influence of the Good can be seen in St. Augustine when he writes, "if all things are deprived of all good whatsoever, they will not exist at all" (*Confessions* Bk.VII, ch.12). The Good is distinct from a God because it "remains an impersonal universal form; the supreme reality, source of all existence, goodness and knowledge, but not the personal creator of the world."⁶¹ Recognition of

⁵⁸ Aristotle, famously pledging to honour the truth above friendship, presents three criticisms of Plato's Good, which can be summarised as follows: 1) the Good does not exist, 2) even if it did exist it would be impossible to reach, and 3) if it did exist and could be reached by man it would be useless in helping to run human affairs (*Nicomachean Ethics* I, vi). Aristotle does not believe in universals, insisting that the good must be qualifiable. Aristotle's first criticism is based on his own competing theory of ethics without metaphysics. Aristotle was not pre-empting the claims of modern relativism that different notions of the good hold equal value. Aristotle's ethical position rests on his functionalism that insists that the good for object, action or person depends on its function.

⁵⁹ Saxonhouse, A., "Democracy, equality and *eide*: a radical view from Book Eight of Plato's *Republic*," *American Political Science Review*, June 1998, 92n(2), p.273, down-loaded 5/12/00, www.web1.infotrac.galegroup.com 14 pages., p.3/14.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, F., *Beyond Good and Evil* [1886], trans. Kaufmann, W., Vintage Books, New York, 1966, p.3.

⁶¹ Jacques, J., *Plato's Republic*, Citadel Press, Derby, 1971, p.99.

the Good, Gurley argues, comes through discipline rather than revelation.⁶² It is dependent on a detailed and meticulous process of education for the Guardians, those who are trained to find and then use the Good. Such an argument only serves to make the Good more elusive. Whereas the Christian God reaches down and offers itself, Plato's Good is exclusive and places an impossible path of ascent before itself. Aristotle was right when he considered the Good to be unobtainable. As the Good is unobtainable, the Forms are, on Socrates' account of the Forms' dependence on the Good, also unobtainable for a man entrapped in his human body. Knowledge of the Forms, as a prerequisite for heroic action, excludes man from obtaining heroism whilst living an earthly life. The *Republic* fails its objective of convincing a sceptical audience that the philosophical life is a model of life that promotes useful action on this earth.

The late dialogues

The Good does not feature in the late dialogues. It is replaced by the notion of the mean which has "its seat in the middle between two extremes" (*Statesman* 284e).⁶³ Ferber argues that the mean is "an intermediate between phenomena of the senses and ideas, namely a standard of judging the realization of an idea ... in the inexact world of the senses."⁶⁴ For Ferber, Plato, in the late dialogues, overcomes Aristotle's criticism that the Good is humanly unobtainable by partially abandoning the metaphysical foundation of his ethical theory and replacing it with an underpinning that is grounded in experience of the sensory world of everyday human existence. The mean, for Ferber, is not an unchanging metaphysical principle that can only be obtained by the working of the divine mind, but a standard of judgement that is based on practical experience. The implication of this interpretation is that Plato also abandons the idea that virtuous action and political legitimacy are based on

⁶² Gurley, for example, writes: "Plato's truth is not one of revelation -the sun is not merely shown. We rather come through it through our own thoughtful and physical efforts." Gurley, J., "Platonic *Paideia*," *Philosophy and Literature*, 23(2), 1999, pp.351-377, p.373.

⁶³ The concept of the mean is applied to matters concerning one's own life in the *Philebus* which asks whether pleasure or reason is good for man (11b-c). The answer is neither but in fact a due "measure" (66a) of the two that is a mixture of beauty, proportion and truth (65a). This third entity is infinitely closer to reason than pleasure (64a-67b).

⁶⁴ Ferber, R., "Did Plato ever Reply to those Critics, who Reproached him for 'the Emptiness of the Platonic Idea or Form of the Good?'" *Essays on Plato's Republic*, [Ed. Ostfeld, N.] Aarhus University Press, 1998, pp.53-58., pp. 54-55.

metaphysical principles. In short, the claim being made is that Plato responds to Aristotle's criticism by pre-empting an Aristotelian ethical position - ethics without metaphysics. The *Statesman* and the *Laws* then become another attempt on Plato's behalf to demonstrate that the philosophical life can serve some utility in this earthly life. A close reading of the *Statesman* and the *Laws* will demonstrate that despite the absence of the Good, Plato's late dialogues are as dependent on a metaphysical basis for their ethical position as the *Phaedo* or the *Republic* and they reaffirm the Platonic ideal that a metaphysical principle can only be grasped by the working of the divine *psychē*. Heroic action remains linked to accessing knowledge of an unworldly nature and hence the ideal of heroism remains one of transcending the human condition in order to become a manly God.

The middle period dialogues use a method of hypothesis to discern the truth (Cf. *Phaedo* 100a, 101d-e). The method of hypothesis works its way up until it reaches an "unhypothetical principle," of metaphysical nature that in the *Republic* is the Good (511b).⁶⁵ In contrast, the Eleatic tetralogy, *Parmenides*, *Theaetetus*, *Sophist* and the *Statesman*, propose a method of division that works its way down by way of a bisective division until the subject of inquiry is identified. The method of division does not require any metaphysical knowledge and could therefore be undertaken by anyone and would thus not be restricted to heroic philosophers. The *Statesman* uses both methods – the long method of a bisective division and subsequently the theory of the mean, which is a return to a method of hypothesis of the middle dialogues. Dorter's starting assumption is that Plato's intention in the *Statesman* cannot be a defence of the conspicuously flawed method of bisective division. The method of division in the *Statesman* makes for painful reading and some of the earlier divisions appear artificial and pointless. The need to divide animals between water-based and land based organisms (264d-e), winged and footed (264e), horned and non-horned (265b), in order to arrive at human beings as the statesman's subjects seems absurd. The absurdity of the division of animals (261c-266d) is recognised by the Stranger when he jokes that by using this division the statesman could equally be a pig-herder (266c). Most readers would not accept the Stranger's apologies for the "repulsiveness we found in the prolixity of our [earlier]

⁶⁵ Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato's Eleatic Dialogues*, *op. cit.*, p.13, p.227.

treatment” (286b).⁶⁶ The method of bisective division can only be offered as a flawed deductive method and does not reappear after it is abandoned in the *Statesman*. The rejection of the method of division in favour of the theory of the mean, which is present in the *Laws*, demonstrates that in the late dialogues Plato maintains, as firmly as anywhere, that the *psychē* must be liberated from the constraints of the body in order to access true knowledge.

The mean is not a mathematical average, but the correct degree between two extremes (*St.* 283b-287b, *Cf. Laws* 722a-b). The Stranger explains:

A short while ago we were tending to assume that things are only to be assessed relative to one another, but that was wrong. What we’re now saying is an improvement, and we’d better acknowledge that things can be assessed not only relative to one another, but also relative to due measure (*metrion*) (283e).

Plato speaks of two types of measurement – relative measurement and intrinsic measurement. A cloak may be large or small relative to another cloak, but what should be important to the weaver is whether it is of the right size for the person who will wear it, the latter is intrinsic measurement.⁶⁷ It is the intrinsic measurement that is essential for conceptual clarity that empowers superior action. Intrinsic measure enables one to determine the mean between two extremes. Determining the mean, for both Aristotle and Plato, is a practical application of theoretical wisdom. For Plato, theoretical knowledge is metaphysical in nature and can only be determined by the working of the divine *psychē*, the seat of reason.

In the *Statesman*, Young Socrates – who is unrelated to the more familiar Socrates – and his companion are talented mathematicians who are unacquainted with

⁶⁶ The divisions appear “meaningless, arbitrary, accidental, and tastelessly prolonged” to Lewis Campbell. Campbell, L., “General Introduction,” *The Sophistes and Politicus of Plato*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1867, p. xlv. See also the similar judgement of Annas who writes that “[t]o get to the political theory we have to go through lengthy passages which on first reading can strike us a mixture of the boring and the weird.” Annas, J., “Introduction,” *Plato: Statesman*, ed. Annas, J. & Waterfield, R., trans. Waterfield, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p.x. The prolixity of the *Statesman* is attributed “to the garrulity of old age” by Taylor. Taylor, A., “Introduction,” *The Statesman*, trans. Taylor, A., E., eds. Kilbansky, R. & Anscombe, E., Thomas Nelson and Sons, London, 1961, p.220.

⁶⁷ Taylor, “Introduction,” *op. cit.*, pp. 220-221, and Taylor, *Plato, op. cit.*, p.399.

dialectical thought. In the language of the *Republic*, they have completed the first three steps of the Guardianship training, but not the last. They are well versed in *dianoia*, logic, but not *noesis*, understanding. In order to make the transition from mathematical *dianoia* to *noesis*, Young Socrates needs to grasp two fundamental conceptions. As Dorter explains:

One is the ability to reduce the indefinite multiplicity of the world to a synoptic order, by perceiving the world in terms of connected forms or kinds of essences rather than individuals (*cf. Sophist* 253d). The other is the ability to discern the inner necessity of the existence of such essences, the fact that, as Socrates puts it in the *Republic*, they all spring from the nature of the good. Thus what is required is that the mathematicians learn to think qualitatively rather than only quantitatively, and eventually learn the teleological mode of thought implied by the myth and presupposed by the concept of the mean.⁶⁸

Young Socrates must first recognise something very similar to the theory of Forms – or a theory of Forms without the Form of the Good. *Parmenides* criticises the theory of Forms, but the Eleatic tetralogy and the *Laws* restates its main features. The Athenian Stranger of the *Laws* asks: “So what better tool can there be for a penetrating investigation of a concept than an ability to look beyond the many dissimilar instances to the single notion?” The answer is unambiguous: “None” (*Laws* 965c). In the *Statesman*, the metaphysically based notion of the mean can divide the multiplicity of the sensory world into categorical standards. “By far the greatest and primary consideration is to honour the method itself of being able to divide according to forms (*eidōs*)” (*St.* 286d). The Greek *eidōs* is “ubiquitous” and it is not clear whether Plato conceived of Forms in the *Statesman* in the same way he had in the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*.⁶⁹ There can be no doubt, however, that Plato believed in the necessity to reduce the complex patterns of repetition in the sensory world to a ‘master plan’ in the world of the *psychē*. The theory of ‘the one of the many’ appears in all the Platonic dialogues, and it is in the *Statesman*, just as it was in the *Republic* or the *Phaedo*, only accessible to the divine *psychē*.

⁶⁸ Dorter, *Form and Good in Plato’s Eleatic Dialogues*, *op. cit.*, p.209.

⁶⁹ Lane, *Method and Politics*, *op. cit.*, p.16. Saunders writes, “Though Plato’s language in describing these counterparts is ambiguous and allusive, it strongly suggests Forms.” *Cf.* Saunders, T., “Plato’s later Political Thought,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Kraut, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 464-492, p.466.

For Plato, the mean has something of the metaphysical Good. As it is an absolute standard, it is divine. The mean cannot, however, be equated to the *Republic's* Good because the mean is dependent on a *technē* (284d). The Good is “unhypothetical,” that is, it exists regardless of anyone discovering it or applying it to practical arts, whereas *praxis* and *theoria* are inextricably linked in the *Statesman*.⁷⁰ However, no art would be possible without such a measure, for all art presupposes a standard of goodness at which to aim (284a-b).

The divinity of the mean is even more clearly expressed in the *Laws*. The Athenian Stranger recommends the mean as a way of bringing up children:

My position is this: the right way of life is neither the single-minded pursuit of pleasure nor the absolute avoidance of pain, but a genial contentment with the state between those extremes – precisely the state, in fact, which we always say is that of God himself. Similarly if one of us aspires to live like a God, this is the state he must try to attain (792c-d Cf. the happy medium between extremes of emotions 732c).

The human *telos* here, as it was in the Socratic dialogues and the middle period dialogues, is to live like a god. One can only do so when the soul is in total command. Book X of the *Laws* maintains that the soul is prior to all physical matter and consequently: “Soul is the master, and matter the natural subject” (896c).

As the soul is the “cause of all things” (896d), it is responsible for virtuous behaviour.

These are the instruments [the] soul uses, whether it cleaves to divine reason (soul itself being, if truth were told, a divinity), and guides everything to an appropriate and successful conclusion, or allies itself with unreason and produces completely opposite results (897a-b).

The *psychē* will lead man to virtuous action and *eudaimonia* so long as it is guided by its rational (divine) component. This is compatible with the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism that maintains that virtuous action would only follow from the dominance of the divine *psychē* over the mortal body, and is equally compatible with

⁷⁰ The similarities with Aristotle's golden mean have been well documented. Cf. Schofield, “The Disappearance of the Philosopher King,” *op. cit.*, p.229.

the psychological model for philosophical excellence presented in the *Republic*: that is, the rational component of the *psychē* allying itself with the spirited in order to control the appetitive component. Terrence Irwin was mistaken when he concluded that the *Laws* and the *Statesman* are in agreement with most points in the *Republic*, “but on one important issue, about the connection between virtue and knowledge, Plato seems to reject (and probably intends to reject) the position he takes in the *Republic*.”⁷¹ The position of the *Republic* was that virtuous action and political legitimacy were dependent on knowledge of the Forms and the central Form of the Good. Plato modifies this position in the *Statesman* but does not reject it because virtuous action remains dependent on knowledge of a metaphysical nature, which is knowledge of the mean.

Conclusion

Homeric man considers a fulfilled human life as the highest possible state of being. Plato, on the other hand, considers human life to be lived amongst shadows and hampered by obscured understanding. For Plato, man can only reach the peaks of heroic excellence when his divine *psychē* escapes the human world and gains clarity by contemplating a metaphysical concept. In the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism this was knowledge of the eternal. The *Republic* introduces the Form of the Good as a guiding metaphysical concept for virtuous human behaviour and the later dialogues, the *Statesman* and *Laws*, rely on knowledge of the mean and a diluted theory of Forms. The contrast between the Homeric view that human life lived to the fullest is the best possible existence and the Platonic view that man must transcend the human condition in order to live life well is starkly demonstrated by the philosopher’s escape from the cave. This escape can be considered as an inversion of Odysseus’ descent (*katabasis*) to the Hall of Hades in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*.⁷²

Odysseus descends from the life of man in the bright burning midday sun into the darkness and shadows of the world of the dead in order to consult with the blind prophet Teiresias. Odysseus and his crew “forsake sunlight” (94) to sail down the

⁷¹ Irwin, *Plato’s Ethics*, *op. cit.*, p.339.

⁷² A *katabasis* is a typical trail for the hero in Greek myths. Other examples are Orpheus’ search for a wife and Heracles’ capture of Kerberus, the hound of Hades. Albinus, Lars, “The Katabasis of Er: Plato’s use of myths, exemplified by the myth of Er,” *Essays on Plato’s Republic*, [Ed. Ostefeld, N.] Aarhus University Press, 1998, pp.91-105, p.94.

River of Ocean towards the underworld. They become “wrapped in mist and fog” (14). “The bright Sun cannot look down on them with his rays ... Dreadful Night spreads her mantle over that unhappy people” (15-19). Among the shadows of the dead Odysseus gains knowledge from Teiresias, which he takes with him back to the world of the living. Odysseus’ mother advises her son: “But now quickly make for the light! And bear in mind all you have learnt here, so that one day you can tell your wife” (*Od.* 11, 220-222). Odysseus undertakes his mother’s advice in great haste.

The Platonic philosopher escapes the darkness of the cave to see the light of the upper world where he gains knowledge. The “dazzled” (515c) prisoner is “overwhelmed by the brightness” (516 a) as he is forced to look directly at the “light of the fire” (515e) and finally the sun itself. Having gained knowledge, the prisoner-cum-philosopher only reluctantly returns to the darkness of the cave to enlighten the men living like shadows in the underworld of the cave. The greatest life for Homeric man was life on the earthly world lived to the full. For Plato, man lived like the prisoners in the cave and had to escape from his human condition to achieve the greatest level of excellence available to man.

Plato, if we are to believe thinkers as disparate as Augustine, Mill and Nietzsche, displaced Homer as the educator of Greece. Indeed, the ideal of restraining emotional and visceral impulses was adopted by many in the ancient world and in their turn Christian scholastic thinkers. Plato continues to mark Western ideas on ethics, morality and ideals of the best human life. The subordination of a “Homeric” life of instinctive human action to a “Platonic” life of intellectual contemplation and emotional restraint did not, however, send to “oblivion the striving for immortality which had been the spring and centre of the *vita activa*,” as Arendt claims.⁷³ Homer retains an attraction to readers because the Homeric ideal of heroic action is within reach. The Homeric hero’s humanity is never in question, allowing readers to more readily aspire to becoming Achilles-like than Socrates-like.

Platonic heroism aims too high. It is not only a model of life that is improbable, but thoroughly impossible. It is, however, a model of life that opens

⁷³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, *op. cit.*, p.21.

itself to the possibility of heroic statesmanship. It is a form of heroism that overcomes the most severe limitation of the Homeric hero, his inability to offer guidance and inspiration for citizens.

CHAPTER 4

Platonic *Polis*: The political engagement of the heroic philosopher

In the *Republic* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates insists that the philosophic person will be very rare. In fact, only a person who has transcended the human condition in order to become, or at least approximate, the divine has a genuine claim to the status of philosopher. Establishing the nature of philosophical knowledge is, however, only the half way point of the Platonic project. Socrates famously declares in the *Republic* that “an end to the trouble of the states will only come when philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers” (*Rep.* 473c). The philosopher who is empowered with knowledge could undertake any activity supremely well, but the most fitting sphere for his talent is the exercise of political sovereignty.

A philosopher would excel at any activity. He would carve a chicken well because he would see through the ephemeral surface of the object – in this case the chicken meat – to the underlying structure of the chicken. Knowing the Form of a chicken, he would know exactly where to make the correct cuts. Likewise, if he devoted himself to boxing, sailing, or even the practice of warfare, he would be the supreme practitioner of such arts because he would approach them with knowledge. A devotion to chicken carving, boxing or even warfare would, however, be to waste the philosopher’s supreme talents. In Plato’s view, the philosopher must devote his supreme ability to the supreme human activity, which is statesmanship. The philosopher’s superiority is not dependent on the exercise of political authority, but a philosopher who did not apply his excellence to politics would be a flawed hero: a supreme human being who has wasted his skills.

Unlike the Homeric epics that remained limited in their political and ethical outlook and only offered a model of individual excellence, the Platonic oeuvre expands the field of heroic action into the realm of political action. Plato offers a model of political legitimacy based upon the heroism of an elite who possesses true knowledge. The philosopher becomes a servant of the public who must first and foremost channel his heroic superiority into creating a better society. Plato, unlike

Homer, attempts to forge heroes into citizens. The philosopher is compelled to take a position of political leadership and he leads for the wellbeing of the community. He rules in the interest of the common good. The community which he rules thus becomes, on Aristotle's definition, a *polis* because it is a political association where leadership is exercised in the common interest. The potential for class mobility in the *Republic*, where the son of a philosopher King can fall down the social order, whilst the shepherd's son may rise, ensures that the Republic is, to an extent, an association of equals. It is spiritual hierarchy based on respective *pschyēs* - some men are better than others but this is based on their capacity, not birth or wealth.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that the principle of political leadership by an heroic class of philosopher empowered by access to true knowledge is a consistent aim of all the Platonic dialogues. The following discussion rejects those readings of the *Republic* as a solely ethical work that is not concerned with ideal models of political association. A reading which sees the construction of the ideal state of the *Republic* in uniquely metaphorical terms as "a model of rational control" for "the would-be-virtuous person to internalise"¹ is unnecessarily narrow and reductionist in scope. A hypothetical model of an unusual constitution presented uniquely as an analogy for virtue in the individual is most un-Socratic in nature and it defies the purpose of analogies generally. Analogies clarify foreign concepts by drawing parallels with quotidian examples. Hence Socrates draws his analogies from commonly practised crafts: navigation, medicine, weaving, herding livestock and shipbuilding. If Socrates or Plato's intention had been to create an analogy for virtuous behaviour, it would not have been in the form of a radical utopian *politeia*, but a simple everyday example. Furthermore, for Plato, like Aristotle, studies of ethics and politics are so closely related to make them virtually one inquiry.²

¹ Annas, J., *Platonic Ethics, Old and New*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1999, p.81; Cf. Stalley, who believes the ideal state is offered as a "heavenly model for ourselves (not for our cities)." Stalley, R., *An Introduction to Plato's Laws*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983. p.17.

² Bambrough, R., "Plato's Political Analogies," *Plato: A Collection of Critical Essays Vol.II*, 1971, ed. Vlastos, G., University of Notre Dame Press, Indiana, 1978, pp. 187-205, p.188.

Enlisting philosophers to rule

Taylor warned long ago of the misconception that Plato advocates a life of pure contemplation:

[Based on Plato's] lifelong conviction that the business of the philosopher among men is to be a statesman, we may infer that he would not himself at any time have subscribed to the doctrine of the *vita contemplativa* without a great deal of explanation and reservation.³

The final stage of the analogy of the cave confirms Taylor's claim. The prisoner who escapes the cave and looks into the sun (the Good) sees the world for what it really is and becomes a philosopher. The escapee must return to the cave and disabuse his former fellows of their continuing belief that the shadows of wooden puppets cast on the wall of the cave are the extent of the world as it really is. If the remaining prisoners were to listen to the returning escapee and follow him out of the cave, the improvement in their life would be considerable. Likewise, the philosopher must apply his knowledge to the task of liberating his fellow citizens by constructing and then ruling a new type of *polis* where his true and exclusive knowledge will be applied to political authority and sovereignty for the benefit of all.

Importantly, those who rule ought to see ruling as a burden that must be endured (347a-d, 519d-21a, esp. 520e, and 540b), as the ruler who is uninterested in material possessions will not be corrupted by political power and will rule a united city. Indeed, the philosopher has no desire to enter politics. Plato argues so emphatically that the philosopher will not want to rule that modern scholarship has questioned the impetus for the philosopher to abandon his blissful contemplation of Forms to return to the cave and rule.⁴ After he has described the Good, Socrates is confronted by Glaucon who re-phrases Adeimantus' objection (419a) that there is not

³ Taylor, A., *Plato; The Man and his Work*, University Paper Backs, [Fourth Ed. 1926], London, 1960, p.182.

⁴ "We arrive at the conclusion that the just city is not possible because of the philosopher's unwillingness to rule." Strauss, L., *The City and Man*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1964, p.124. The study of the Forms is, Annas writes, a "necessarily self-undermining skill" because knowledge of Forms, enlightenment, draws the escaped prisoner away from his former fellows and he becomes so engrossed with his new found knowledge that he does not want to re-enter the world of sensory illusion. His new found theoretical basis for his virtue makes him disinclined to practise it. An analogy would be a political theorist who is so disillusioned with contemporary politics that she buries herself in the study of historical theories of state. Annas, *Platonic Ethics, op. cit.*, p.105.

much incentive for the philosophers to rule (519e). Socrates' response is the same as earlier:

You are forgetting again that it isn't the law's concern to make any one class in the city outstandingly happy but to contrive to spread happiness throughout the city by bringing the citizens into harmony with each other through persuasion or compulsion and by making them share with each other the benefits that each class can confer on the community (519e *cf.* 420b-421c, 462a-466c).

Participation in politics does not benefit the philosopher other than the fact that it spares him the misfortune of living in a *polis* led by imbeciles or the self-interested. The philosopher is the only person who can rule justly because he has true knowledge. The philosopher rules in the interests of the common good and hence the *polis* he leads becomes a correctly constituted political association on Aristotle's definition.

Socrates believes the order to philosophers to rule will be obeyed despite it being against their personal interest and personal desire because "it will be giving just orders to just people" (*Rep.* 520e). True philosophers return to the darkness of the cave to enlighten those left behind because it is what Justice demands, "they realise that it is best – simply *best*, not best *for* any particular group of people."⁵ A philosopher trained in the doctrine of the *Republic* would not reject a just repayment for services gained, as it would be "violating the proper order among human relationships."⁶ Finally, the Forms represent perfect harmony because they are incorporeal and hence unchanging ensuring "that the orderly patterns they exhibit will never deteriorate" (527c-530b).⁷ This perfect harmony is perfect unity, which is the greatest political good. For Kraut, the ascent to the Forms implies a love of order and one who loves order will be obliged to establish order in his *polis*.⁸

⁵ Annas, *An Introduction*, *op. cit.*, p267.

⁶ Kraut, R., "Return to the Cave 519-521," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J. Cleary, VII, pp.43-62, 1991, p.53.

⁷ Kraut, R., "The defense of justice in Plato's *Republic*," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Kraut, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 311-337, p.323.

⁸ Kraut, R., "Return to the Cave 519-521," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, ed. J. Cleary, VII, pp.43-62, 1991, pp. 51-61; Kraut, "The defence of justice in Plato's *Republic*," *op. cit.*, pp. 319-331.

Neither the philosopher, nor the cave escapee, will be treated as a returning hero or liberator, but they are likely to be persecuted by their former fellows:

Nor will you [Glaucou] think it strange that anyone who descends from contemplation of the divine to the imperfections of human life should blunder and make a fool of himself, if, while still blinded and unaccustomed to the darkness, he's forcibly put on trial in the law-courts or elsewhere about images of justice or their shadows, and made to dispute about conceptions of justice held by men who have never seen absolute justice (*Rep.* 517 d-e).

Socrates is the model for the one who has ascended from the obscurity of images and reflections of the cave and returns to pass on his enlightenment to others only to be killed by the unenlightened. Socrates sacrifices himself to the truth, a truth which will ultimately benefit all men even if they are initially blind to it. The Homeric hero risked his life to gain glory for himself. The philosopher risks his reputation and ultimately his life in order to lead his fellow citizens out of their sorry state.

The elitist nature of philosophical rule throughout the entire Platonic corpus

The *Republic* should not be read as a manifesto for concrete change in political institutions because it is a Republic in speech (472d). Plato did not consider the constitutional arrangements of the *Republic* to be feasible, nor did he advocate their immediate implementation. The principle that political leadership should be placed in the hands of an elite who possesses real knowledge, however, is feasible. Political legitimacy based on knowledge as possessed by philosophers is most strongly expressed in the *Republic*, but it is a basic tenet of Platonic philosophy maintained throughout the entire Platonic corpus. The wise are impelled to use their wisdom for the good of all. The expert of public management (early dialogues), the philosopher (*Republic*), the statesman (*Statesman*) and the legislator (*Laws*) fashion a state that reflects their own personal characteristics. The philosopher's divine knowledge enables him to prosper because he is marked by internal unity. The state he models on his own image will equally prosper because it benefits from wise and knowledgeable leadership and internal harmony.

The establishment and defence of autocratic philosophical leadership in the *Republic* is not disputed. The autocratic nature of the early and late dialogues, however, is less certain. The inconsistency of views on democracy between the various ‘periods’ of the Platonic dialogues is a keystone in Vlastos’ developmental thesis that argues that there are distinct stages of development between the “early Socratic” period and the middle and late “Platonic period” dialogues. Contrary to Vlastos’ claims, Socrates and Plato advanced the ideal of political leadership held by an heroic elite with access to infallible knowledge consistently throughout the Platonic dialogues. For Vlastos, Socrates in the early dialogues is a populist who favours the Athenian democracy, with its numerous faults, over any other contemporary constitution. In the middle dialogues, however, democracy is seen as worse than all other constitutions other than lawless tyranny.⁹ Vlastos’ first and most important demarcation between the early and middle Socrates was that the early Socrates was “exclusively a moral philosopher.”¹⁰ However, it can be argued that the early Socrates was not uniquely a moral philosopher because his discourse on virtue has explicit political implications. Intellectual contemplation leads to heroic virtue and action in all fields, including politics. The notion that statesmanship, the management of public affairs, is a craft that should only be practised by experts is present in all the Platonic dialogues that touch upon politics.

The two most overtly political dialogues of the early period are the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*. Protagoras teaches virtue, which he sees as soundness of mind and self-restraint. The political application of virtue is made clear by Protagoras:

What I teach is the proper management of one’s own affairs, how best to run one’s household, and the management of public affairs, how to make the most effective contribution to the affairs of the city both by word and action (318e-319a).

Essentially, Protagoras claims to make his pupils better citizens. The contention between Protagoras and Socrates rests not on the teachability of virtue, but on the fact

⁹ See Vlastos’ sixth and seventh point of difference between the Socrates of the early dialogues and the middle dialogues, Vlastos, G., *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p.48.

¹⁰ Vlastos, *Socrates*, *op. cit.*, p.47.

that Protagoras sees virtue as a combination of different qualities, including wisdom, courage, piety, temperance and justice (349b), whereas Socrates believes that all virtues are a matter of intellectual reasoning. The consequence of this is that Socrates believes that virtue may be taught to an even greater extent than Protagoras, but believes it to be a considerably harder task. The hierarchical and exclusive nature of the ability to learn virtue adopted by Socrates inevitably leads to an equally hierarchical and exclusive doctrine of political authority. For Socrates, only those who have learnt heroic virtue should be trusted to take political decisions that effect everyone.

Protagoras, unlike Socrates, believes that virtue and the ability to contribute to affairs of state is innate in all free men. These skills can be polished with tuition. Protagoras' belief rests upon his version of the creation myth. According to this myth (320d-322d), Epimetheus gives humans reason to distinguish them from the beasts, Prometheus steals ability in the practical arts from Athena and fire from Hephaestus and gives it to the human race, and finally Zeus gives humans justice and conscience so that they can form a city (322b-d). Justice and conscience are given to all and are therefore latent in everyone and can be taught (320c-328d). Socrates and Protagoras agree that justice is a craft – a *technē*. A *technē*, unlike a characteristic, such as beauty, can be taught and its absence, in this case injustice, can be rectified, unlike ugliness or shortness (323a-328d). Protagoras maintains that because Zeus gave every man the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, “virtue [is] something in which no one can be a layman if there is to be a city” (327a). Every citizen has the god-given right to partake in debate on political and moral issues in the *polis* because they possess an innate, god-given sense of justice. Consequently, Protagoras defends the Athenian democratic practice of entrusting the commissioning of a new public building or a ship to the experts of these crafts, architects and ship builders, but allowing any citizen the right to participate in debate on political and moral legislation (Prot. 320d-328d, esp. 322a-324d).¹¹ Protagoras did not believe that every citizen's input would be equally valuable, but that “every citizen had something that was at least potentially of value to contribute to debates on moral and political questions.”¹²

¹¹ The same argument is put forward in Pericles' funeral oration. (Thucydides, II, 40.)

¹² Kerferd, G., *The Sophistic Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, p. 147.

Kerferd sees Protagoras' discourse defending Athenian political practice as the first theoretical defence of participatory democracy. Within the citizenship body in Athens, which was, of course, highly exclusive, every citizen was treated as equal.¹³ The consequence of this, for Socrates, was that people who did not know right from wrong were effectively in control of legislation.

For Socrates, in contrast, obtaining virtue is an intellectual task that only very few people will ever achieve. The political consequence is that Socrates, unlike Protagoras, does not believe that all citizens have a contribution to make in the area of governance. Only experts in maintaining well-balanced souls should be given an audience on legislative issues in the same way that only ship-builders are given an audience when naval designs are the matter under consideration (319a-e). Expertise in balancing political affairs depends on true knowledge and consequently experts in politics will be rarer still than expert ship builders. This is a fundamentally undemocratic position because it rejects the ideal of every citizen's opinion being of equal worth. Very few people are skilled in the art of navigation, in fact even skilled backgammon players are one in a thousand (*Statesman* 292e), and it would be overly optimistic, and indeed foolish, to believe that more than a tiny elite could master the skills required to become a statesman (*Statesman* 297b-c). The numerical inferiority of the Guardians is equally stressed in the *Republic* (*Rep.* 428-429). For Protagoras, all men had equal potential that could be polished with the result that some men could become better men and consequently better citizens. Nonetheless, in the running of public affairs, all men had something of equally potential value and should be listened to. For Socrates, on the other hand, not all men had equal potential: some had the capacity to be taught knowledge, others did not. A man who had grasped true knowledge was so clearly superior to other men that it should necessarily fall upon this heroic man to lead lesser mortals.

In the *Statesman*, a dialogue from a later period, Plato again emphasises the dangers of allowing all men to partake in the formulation of legislation. Where

¹³ Lee estimates that at the time of Plato's birth, the population of Athens was in the vicinity of 250,000 to 300,000, of whom only 40,000 to 50,000 were citizens. Women, slaves, children and metics, residents not born in Athens, were excluded from citizenship. Lee, H., "Introduction," *The Republic* [1955], Penguin, London, 1973, p.22.

legislation is placed above the pursuit of knowledge and expertise in technical spheres the results can be disastrous (298a-300b). Plato once again uses the examples of the navigator and the doctor. In this scenario anyone could make suggestions in the assembly on how navigation or medicine should be carried out. These suggestions could then be voted into law. Once the laws were ratified any transgression of the laws or enquiry into their rationale would be punishable by death. The result of such a legal code would be the total destruction of all the arts and sciences because the pursuit of truth would be reduced to a popularity contest.¹⁴ Plato's preferred solution is to always place expertise over written law, with the proviso that genuine expertise is actually available. In the absence of expertise – wisdom founded on true knowledge – adherence to a legal code, whatever its flaws, is the second best option.

It has been argued that Socrates' argument against democracy is not an argument against democracy *per se*, but one against ignorant democracy, and the same case holds against ignorant aristocracy or an ignorant monarchy. Sharples, for example, writes:

What matters for Plato is that correct judgements should be reached, and that knowledge should prevail. Thus in the ideal state of the *Republic*, where the Philosopher Rulers by definition know best, Plato's view is that there is simply no point in consulting anyone else.¹⁵

In the *Gorgias*, it is Callicles and not Socrates who describes the citizens of Athens as “an assembly of slaves and assorted other forms of human debris who could be completely discounted if it weren't for the fact that they do have physical strength at their disposal” (489c). Yet Socrates does not disagree with Callicles' disgust at the Athenian *demos* and expresses equally anti-democratic statements with more subtlety. The role of the philosopher is to stand up heroically for the truth, which only he knows because only he has knowledge, regardless of how many people may align

¹⁴ The problem of strict adherence to a written code frustrating the initial purpose of a law in evolving human societies makes Aristotle differentiate between justice (strict adherence to the law) and *epieikeia* (equity) which is the spirit of the law (*Ethics* V.x). Annas, J. & Waterfield, R., *Plato: Statesman*, ed. Annas, J. & Waterfield, R., *op. cit.*, p.59n.

¹⁵ Sharples, R. W., “Plato on democracy and expertise,” *Greece and Rome*, 41(1), April 1994, pp.49-57, p54.

against him. As was the case for Socrates himself, this dedication to the truth must be maintained even in the face of death. For the Socrates of the *Gorgias*, even if everyone in the city stood against one, the weight of the multitude counts for nothing in determining who is right and possesses the truth.

Now too, nearly every Athenian and alien will take your side on the things you're saying, if it's witnesses you want to produce against me to show that what I say isn't true. ... Nonetheless, though I'm only one person, I don't agree with you. You don't compel me; instead you produce many false witnesses against me and try to banish me from my property, the truth (*Gorgias* 472a-b).

If the property of truth is a personal belief that one holds onto in the face of the masses, it would by itself have no political, or more specifically no anti-democratic, application. A free religious minority can stick to its beliefs without acting anti-democratically. However, in the context of Socrates' preceding analogy, likening the orators' connection to legislation to a pastry cook's relation to medicine, it is clear that Socrates sees political implications in the possession of the property of truth:

Pastry baking has put on the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body, so that if a pastry cook and a doctor had to compete in front of children, or in front of men just as foolish as children, to determine which of the two, the doctor or the pastry cook, had expert knowledge of good food and bad, the doctor would die of starvation (464d). ... [W]hat cosmetics is to gymnastics, sophistry is to legislation, and what pastry baking is to medicine, oratory is to justice (465c).

For Socrates, in the *Gorgias*, as in the *Republic*, the merit of legislation should be determined by a philosopher who, like Socrates, has true knowledge. The opinions of men without knowledge, regardless of how numerous they are, should simply be discounted and ignored. The philosopher *knows* what is good and bad. Ordinary men, like the children judging what constitutes a good diet, do not. The Socrates of the *Gorgias* aims for the domination of the many by the few, or even the one, who possesses the truth. Latour finds there is in the *Gorgias* a fight

pitting the people of Athens, the ten thousand fools, against Socrates and Callicles, allied buddies, *agreeing on everything* and differing *only* about the swiftest means to silence the crowd. ... Will it be through the

appeal to reason, geometry, proportion? Or will it be through aristocratic virtue and upbringing?¹⁶

Vlastos' claim that the Socrates of the early dialogues, unlike the Socrates of the middle dialogues, was neutral towards democracy cannot be sustained. The Socrates of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias* is deeply anti-democratic. For the "early period" Socrates, political legitimacy can only be held by those who possess *politikē technē*, the craft of politics. The craft of politics relies on possessing virtue, which is dependent on knowledge of the eternal. In the doctrine of Socratic Intellectualism, outlined in the previous chapter, a man with knowledge of the eternal is capable of virtuous action in any activity he undertakes because virtue is dependent on knowledge. Consequently, a man with knowledge is rightly regarded as heroic. In the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, Socrates clearly believes that when the *polis* deliberates on actions it should undertake, the considerations of heroes completely outweighs the contribution of those who lack the true knowledge required to possess *politikē technē*, the craft of politics. The man with knowledge is heroic and his vast superiority over those without knowledge should be applied to politics. When this occurs it will be to the great benefit of all who are subjected to his political authority.

Philosophical leadership in late dialogues

Political legitimacy is based on knowledge in the later political dialogues, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, as clearly as in any other Platonic dialogue. The Stranger from Elea, who leads the conversation in the *Statesman*, states that "the best thing is not that laws should prevail, but rather the kingly man who possesses wisdom" (294a). As wisdom in the *Statesman* is envisaged as *noēsis*, understanding of a metaphysical nature which in the *Statesman* is based on the mean and due measure, the ideal of a "kingly man who possesses wisdom" and applies this wisdom to the running of the *polis* is a clear echo of the Philosopher King. The underlying foundation of the statesman's knowledge is, like it was for the Philosopher King, metaphysical knowledge. The statesman, again like the Philosopher King, does not need to exercise his excellence in all activities to be considered heroic. He has the capacity for all-round excellence, but devotes himself to statesmanship. The

¹⁶Latour, B., "Socrates' and Callicles' Settlement – or the Invention of the Impossible Body Politic," *Configurations*, 5.2, 1997, pp.189-240, p.207.

statesman is not a technocrat who controls every single activity of the *polis*. He exercises supreme judgement because of his metaphysical knowledge, which allows him to choose the correct mean between extremes, but he does not need to practise all arts that contribute to a well-run state. The statesman does not hold all the strings of the state in the manner that the Philosopher King does. He “governs the governors.”¹⁷ The true statesman is a less exalted figure than the Philosopher King, but his superiority over ordinary mortals is still nonetheless so stark that the statesman, like the Philosopher King, is an heroic figure. The application of his heroism to the running of the *polis* is beneficial to the *polis* as a whole and all who live in it.

Young Socrates – no relationship to the more familiar Socrates – expresses a view that is typical for an Ancient Greek, or indeed, a modern thinker. He is shocked by the Stranger’s proposal that the ideal constitution is one where a political leader supersedes the law (293e). For the Eleatic Stranger, the best possible form of political rule is that of a Philosopher King type of statesman because wisdom based on true knowledge is greater than the wisdom of a stagnant legal code. The analogy of the travelling doctor helps to clarify why the Stranger favours the political authority of a “kingly man” over a legal code. A doctor about to embark on a long trip would leave a set of instructions. Upon returning earlier than forecasted and finding the patient’s condition altered, a good doctor would change his instructions (295b-d). Likewise, a fixed legal code:

is like a stubborn, stupid person who refuses to allow the slightest deviation from or questioning of his own rules, even if the situation has in fact changed and it turns out to be better for someone to contravene these rules (294b).

However, in the absence of a true “kingly man”, a very likely scenario, a strongly enforced legal code is “a perfectly acceptable second-best course of action to fall upon” (297e).¹⁸ This legal code should not be subject to change at the hands of the

¹⁷ McIntyre, Alex, “Virtuosos of Contempt: An Investigation of Nietzsche’s Political Philosophy Through Certain Platonic Political Ideas,” *Nietzsche-Studien*, vol.21, 1992, pp.184-210, pp.184-5, p.199.

¹⁸ Many commentators have seen the *Statesman* as the mid-point between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. Klosko writes that “the Statesman stands midway between the worlds of Plato’s two major political dialogues” Klosko, *The Development of Plato’s Political Theory*, *op. cit.*, p.187. Such a reading fits in particularly well with a developmentalist approach, but is also surprisingly favoured by Annas. Annas

body of citizens because “no large body of people can master any branch of expertise” (300e).

And this is why, when laws and statues have been established, the second best course is to prevent any individual or body of people from ever infringing them in the slightest (300c).

The set legal code was written by someone with expertise, or at least someone who had access to expert advice. Whoever established the legal code in the first place was a master legislator in the mould of Lycurgus or Solon. Solon and Lycurgus are the closest historical approximations of Philosopher Kings. The second-best option, therefore, is grounded on the existence of an ideal statesman, that is, the best option. The worst-case scenario, other than lawless tyranny where legislation is subjected to the tyrant’s self-interest, is a legal code that is consistently changed on the whims of ignorant fools.

The statesman’s duty to overrule fixed laws would seem to overturn the fixed political epistemology and educational prescriptions of the *Republic*.¹⁹ However, the Philosopher King of the *Republic* does not rule by fixed laws, but by virtue of his justice, which is his well-balanced psychological state. In the *Republic*, the political aspect of the analogy of the just city only sets a formal description of the philosophers’ rule. The just city is one ruled by the wisest but very little prescriptive indication of what that rule will entail is actually given. The foundation upon which the Philosopher Kings’ laws are based are universal and metaphysical, but it does not necessarily follow that the laws themselves are metaphysical and unchanging. Evidence from the *Republic* itself indicates that just laws are subject to future change as Plato leaves the door open for later Philosopher Kings to modify all aspects of the state (*Rep.* 607b-608b). The seemingly central need for censorship of poetry in early education, for example, is not set in stone if lovers of poetry can prove why “it ought to have a place in the well-governed city” (*Rep.* 607c).

starts her introduction to the Cambridge edition stressing the importance of the work: “It clarifies and modifies Plato’s earlier positions ... and illuminates the principles of his political thinking even while these are in the process of changing.” Annas, J., “Introduction,” *Plato: Statesman*, ed. Annas, J. & Waterfield, R., trans. Waterfield, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp. ix-xxiv, p. ix.

¹⁹ Nussbaum, M., *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.218n.9.

The desire for a kingly leader with wisdom in the *Statesman* is equally born from Plato's long-standing fear of instability:

People and situations differ, and human affairs are characterised by an almost permanent state of instability. It is therefore impossible to devise, for any given situation, a simple rule which will apply to everyone for ever (294b).

The kingly man with wisdom of the *Statesman*, like the Philosopher King, is an instrument of unity because he can change his rules to meet the needs of a changing situation which helps to keep the citizenry body satisfied.

The analogy of weaving is used as an illustration of the art of statesmanship (279a-283b).²⁰ The role of the statesman is to apply his philosophical knowledge to integrate the practical expertise of his lieutenants. There are many subordinate tasks associated with weaving that are essential in their own right, but are not part of the art of weaving. Likewise, there are many areas of expertise subordinated to the art of statesmanship. The Stranger identifies four subordinate roles: the general, the administrator of justice (judiciary), the political rhetorician (303e-304a) and the educator (308d). The practitioners of these subordinate crafts master their *technēs* (crafts), but they are not political *technēs*. The general knows how to conduct war, but only the statesman knows when to conduct war.²¹ Likewise, the rhetorician knows how to persuade, but only the statesman knows whether to persuade.

The point is that genuine kings do not actually do things themselves; they govern people whose domain is doing, and they know when to embark on and initiate courses of action which are particularly important to a state, and when it's better to hold back. They delegate actions to others (305d).

The subordinate experts who receive instructions from the statesman are independent experts who have knowledge that the statesman does not possess. For example, the statesman will tell the educator what type of characteristics he wants in

²⁰ Plato's original audience would have been far more familiar with the art of weaving than anyone today. Same example is used at *Laws* 73e-735a.

²¹ Cf. *Euthydemus* 290b-d. A general captures a city, but doesn't know what to do with it. A hunter or fisherman passes on his catch to a cook.

his citizens without knowing how the educator will go about this task. The implication is that unlike the Philosopher King of the *Republic*, the statesman does not lay claim to all expertise. “Many of the functions assigned to Guardians in the Republic are now separated from government as such.”²² The Philosopher King, it should be recalled, spent fifteen years in public administration before assuming his role as king. This implies that he was trained in all aspects of the state. Furthermore, the subordinate experts can lay claim to total expertise in their area without some higher knowledge, for example, knowledge of the Good, or knowledge of the mean.²³ To this point, the statesman as analogous to the weaver indicates that political authority can be a skill practised by someone lacking metaphysical knowledge. The true statesman is simply one with a sense of timing based on practical experience. This would represent a major departure from the notion of the Philosopher King presented in the *Republic*, and would be remarkably similar to the role of a President or Prime Minister who coordinates the actions of the members of his or her executive body. These aspects of the weaving analogy led Lane to declare:

Political expertise [in the *Statesman*] is neither meta-knowledge nor another species of knowledge, but rather knowledge of the relation between other forms of knowledge and the temporal demands of the moment of action, or the *kairos*.²⁴

There are several reasons for rejecting Lane’s interpretation. Firstly, there is nothing in the *Republic* that directly suggests that subordinate public officials will not act independently in the manner described in the *Statesman*. Indeed, the definition of justice as minding one’s own business encourages independence by craftsmen in their chosen crafts.²⁵ Secondly, at this point the analogy of the weaver remains silent on what it is that gives the statesman this ability to coordinate the actions of his

²² Skemp, J. B., “Introductory Essays,” *Plato’s Statesman: A Translation of the Politicus of Plato with Introductory Essays and Footnotes*, Bristol Classical Press, 1952, [Second Edition] 1987, pp.13-111, p.47.

²³ Cooper, J., “Plato’s *Statesman* and Politics,” *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, 1997, eds. Cleary, J., & Gurtler, G., Brill, Leiden, Boston, Cologne, 1999, pp.71-104., pp.90-91.

²⁴ Lane, M., *Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, pp.3-4.

subordinates. The first half of the weaving analogy describes what the statesman does, but does not explain why he has the ability to do it. The statesman's sense of timing is not based on experience, but on knowledge of the mean. The mean is the correct point between two extremes. It is based on metaphysical knowledge rather than asserted through a mathematical average. At the start of the dialogue, the Eleatic Stranger draws a division between the science of acting and the science of knowing before concluding that the art of statesmanship falls into the art of knowing (258b-259d). This division is similar to Aristotle's division between practical and philosophical knowledge. Unlike Aristotle, the Stranger sees the knowledge of the statesmanship as theoretical.²⁶ Theoretical knowledge is then divided into producer and instructional knowledge (260e-261a). The mathematician produces knowledge for the sake of knowledge as he simply observes mathematical principles, whereas the master builder and the statesman give instructions based on their knowledge. The statesman's "instructional" and "theoretical" knowledge is based on his knowledge of the mean. The mean, as previously argued and contrary to Lane's assertion, is metaphysical in nature. The statesman is an heroic human being. His superiority in any activity that he undertakes is founded on his grasp of metaphysical knowledge. Like the Philosopher King, he could exercise his superiority in any field, but is compelled to use his supreme talents for the benefit of all by taking a role of leadership in the *polis*.

The analogy of the weaver is completed at the end of the dialogue (306a-311c). It serves as a metaphor for the statesman's primary and "hardest" task. The Stranger claims there are two basically good personality types – the courageous and the moderate.²⁷ If left unchecked, these two personality types come into violent disagreement leading to open hostility; producing "a disease that is most hateful of all for cities" (307d). These personality types are self-seeking and tend to breed together making the trait more pronounced. A city made exclusively of either type –

²⁵ Mistis, P., "Commentary on Cooper," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy*, Vol. XIII, 1997, eds. Cleary, J., & Gurtler, G., Brill, Leiden, Boston, Cologne, 1999, pp.105-110, p.109.

²⁶ "[We can] assert that the King is more closely related to the theoretical sort of knowledge than to the manual or generally practical sort" (259c-d)

²⁷ There might be other good personal traits, but he remains silent on them.

courageous or moderate – is bound to degenerate into slavery. The meek will avoid conflict at all cost and become unfit for war or surrender too willingly and will be reduced to slavery (307e). The overly aggressive will equally be reduced to slavery because they will make too many enemies and will eventually be conquered (308a). If properly cultivated, these two natural virtues, as Aristotle calls them (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.xiii, *Eudemian Ethics* III.vii), can become highly virtuous and live together harmoniously. The statesman’s task is to intermix these two personality types to create the mean within the citizens individually and within the state as a whole. Weaving the weft and the warp can only be achieved with knowledge of the metaphysical mean.²⁸ The statesman’s heroic abilities enable him to make the citizens of his *polis* literally better people by inter-breeding complementary personality types. The specified inter-marriage and inter-breeding (310b) resonates with the eugenics program for the guardian class in the *Republic*. This mixing program demonstrates that the ideal statesman’s task goes well beyond a simple coordination of his subordinates’ skills. The statesman is an heroic character who applies his heroism to making the *polis* he lives in and its citizens better. The statesman’s ability to undertake this task rests on his grasp of metaphysical knowledge. Like the escaped prisoner from the cave, the statesman can see what other men cannot. The statesman uses his skill to make people *better*, his leadership then provides an environment where these better people can prosper.

For the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, political legitimacy is, again, based on philosophical knowledge. The *Laws* was Plato’s last dialogue and it was left “unpublished” upon his death.²⁹ The supreme legislative body in Magnesia – the state proposed in the *Laws* – is the nocturnal council. The nocturnal council is “to act as the reason of the state by discerning the aims of the legislation and the means of achieving them.”³⁰ Every detail of legislation should have a single end in view, which is virtue. As with all the Platonic dialogues, virtue is dependent on reason (*Laws* 963a). Reason is the domain of the eternal *psychē*. The wise old men of the

²⁸ In weaving the warp is the lengthways thread that adds strength, it is the scaffolding of the garment. The weft (also called woof) is the sideways thread that contributes the softness of the garment.

²⁹ Cooper, J., “Introduction,” Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, J. & Hutchinson, D., Hackett, Indianapolis & Cambridge, 1997, pp.vii-xxvi, p.xii.

³⁰ Stalley, *An Introduction to Plato’s Laws*, *op. cit.*, p.7.

nocturnal council must grasp two concepts in order to subordinate legislation to philosophy.

First, that the soul is far older than any created thing, and that it is immortal and controls the entire matter of the world; and a second doctrine we've expounded often enough before that reason is the supreme power amongst heavenly bodies (967d-e). ... No one who is unable to acquire these insights and rise above the level of ordinary virtues will ever be good enough to govern an entire state, but only to assist government carried on by others (968a).

Here again, Plato makes the key distinction between a ruler and a subordinated expert. Political legitimacy in the *Laws* is based on knowledge, as it is in all the Platonic dialogues. This does not represent a major departure from the *Republic* or the *Statesman* because in both those dialogues knowledge is the domain of the divine *psychē*. The *psychē* here is considered the eternal and divine component of man, and can only be accessed by reason. Virtuous action will follow from a virtuous internal balance, which is the favouring of divine and eternal reason over the mortal and material desires of the body. Only then will the natural virtue be polished into a genuine virtue.

The benefit of the rule of the wise is asserted in all Platonic dialogues that touch upon politics. The wisdom of the political leaders is founded on metaphysical knowledge. The just state ruled by the heroic philosopher will prosper in the same manner that the heroic philosopher himself will prosper. The philosopher grasps true knowledge and this enables him to harmonise his soul so that unity can reign within it. The philosopher's application of his true knowledge to the larger canvass of the *polis* at large will enable the *polis* to prosper because harmony and unity will likewise be the predominant factors.

The benefits of philosophical rule: harmony and unity in the *Republic*

Plato lived in a time of Athenian decay and decline and saw internal conflict as the greatest vice and danger for the *polis*. Born in 428BC, Plato was 24 when Athens lost the Peloponnesian Wars in 404BC. As members of the land-holding aristocracy, Plato and his family were amongst those most severely affected by the Athenian war tactic of retreating behind the city walls and allowing the surrounding countryside to

be ravished whilst relying on trade maintained by the Athenian fleet to keep the city supplied. At the conclusion of the Peloponnesian Wars, Athenian democracy was overtaken by the Tyranny of the Thirty, whom Plato had been urged to join. Plato became disillusioned with the Tyranny of the Thirty as he saw at close hand (a cousin and an uncle of his were among the thirty) how power corrupts. With the death of Critias, democracy was reinstated in 403BC. In 399BC, the reinstated democracy condemned Socrates to death leaving Plato equally disillusioned with democracy as a form of governance. Plato died in 347BC, nine years before Athens fell to Phillip of Macedon.³¹ For Socrates and Plato, happiness and wellbeing did not consist of equality, liberty or fairness. Plato's ideal and second best states (*Republic*, *Laws*) are based upon harmony, unity, efficiency and moral goodness. The chief vices are strife, division, change and breakdown. The implementation of rule by Philosopher Kings assures political unanimity and averts internal conflict within the *polis*.

The philosopher in the *Republic* balances his *psychē* correctly. His reason, in conjunction with spirit, dominates his appetite. The appetites sometime give expression to immediate desires that are against the wellbeing of the body as a whole. The example Socrates gives is a man who is thirsty but does not drink because he suspects the water is polluted. The role of reason is to over-rule the appetite to quench the thirst for the overall good of the whole. The spirit should help to enforce reason's decisions.

And don't we often see a man whose desires are trying to force him to do something his reason disapproves of cursing himself and getting indignant with them? It's like a struggle between political factions, with indignation [spirit] fighting on the side of reason (440b).

Grube translates "struggle between political factions" as no less than "a civil war."³² A state of civil war is detrimental to either a state or an individual. The philosopher overcomes internal turmoil because he orders his life correctly. Having wrought internal harmony within himself, the philosopher attempts to replicate that internal harmony amongst the political factions of the *polis*. When the three political

³¹ Lee, "Introduction," *op. cit.*, pp.9-18.

³² *Republic*, trans. Grube, G., rev. Reeve, C., in *Complete Works*, ed. Cooper, J. & Hutchinson, D., Hackett, Indianapolis & Cambridge, 1997.

factions within the individual work in unison, a man drives towards his goals – the obtainment of knowledge – like a first-rate charioteer in control of two well trained horses. When the three factions are seeking different ends, the charioteer (reason), the well-bred horse (spirit) and the unruly, bestial horse (appetite) pull in different directions and the charioteer is likely to fall out of his chariot (*Phaedrus* 246a-257b). When the correct order of the three factions of the soul is achieved, a man is said to be just. Justice is in the individual's self-interest because he operates at peak efficiency: "a bad soul will govern and manage things badly while the good would will in all these things do well" (*Rep.* 353 e). Justice is beneficial to the state because it ensures that public affairs are well managed.

The insistence on an individual displaying internal harmony and unity is, in the *Republic*, taken to the extreme of outlawing direct speech in poetry because it involves what Plato terms "representation" (393c). The poet puts himself in the position of someone else, thinking his thoughts and feeling his emotions. The author, and indeed the reader, is thus inclined to deviate from their own character, their own unity of being. The same objection is made to acting because it involves playing the role of another. If one person attempts to be many people he will become a weak and incomplete version of each person he tries to emulate (394d). "One man does one job well, and if he tries to take on a number of jobs, the division of effort will mean that he fails to make a mark in any of them" (394e). In the ideal state, each person should do what they are naturally best suited to do. This is fundamentally anti-egalitarian because in Plato's consideration the wise are the best, and are naturally best suited to ruling, whilst the majority are best suited to obeying.

Having established internal harmony within himself, the Philosopher King establishes a state in his own image. Plato's ideal state, the *Republic*, is composed of three different classes: the Guardians who are the rulers; the Auxiliaries who enforce the Guardians' rule and defend the *Republic* as an external and internal security force; and the rest of the population, the farmers, businessmen, craftsmen and whoever else may exist in the state. The Guardians are wise and exercise sound judgement over the rest of the state. Every profession has its expertise, and the expertise of the Guardians, and the Guardians alone, is wisdom. The Guardians are the smallest class, but make decisions on behalf of all. Courage is held by the Auxiliary (military) class.

Discipline is not the domain of one class, but is found in the entire city when the three classes in the state are in the proper balance or harmony. The correct balance is achieved when the Auxiliaries aid the Guardians in subordinating the masses. Socrates has proved that his *Republic* is efficient and virtuous by locating the four cardinal virtues – wisdom, courage, discipline (or temperance) and justice – within his state. When each class sticks to the job it is meant to do, the *polis* will act with unity and harmony.

The best-governed state is one “which is most like a single human being” (*Rep.* 462 b). If the state is like the heroic philosopher, it will be an heroic state. The community must not be divided; the citizens must all feel happy or disappointed by the same things.³³ This is the first time the state was seen as the individual writ large.³⁴ The philosopher lives in internal harmony and achieves heroic virtue in all activities he undertakes because he has knowledge of the Forms. “Plato assumes that the philosopher’s knowledge of the Forms will create the desire to express his knowledge in action.”³⁵ The philosopher’s primary field of action is politics. Internal peace and harmony, wise leadership and everyone adhering to the job they are meant to do are prescriptive ideals that can be implemented beyond the Republic in speech.

The desire for unity within the *polis*, Okin insists, is Plato’s motivation for integrating women into the leadership class in the *Republic*. Okin further insists that by the time of writing the *Laws*, Plato had convinced himself of the hypothesis on which the community of wives and children is based and had come to genuinely believe that women were capable of participating in the public realm. Plato now declares that it is a “surprising blunder” on a legislator’s behalf to have wasted one

³³ “Do we know of a worst evil for a *polis* than that which lacerates this *polis* and makes it many instead of one?” (*Rep.* 462a; cf. 422e; 462b)

³⁴ Socrates argues that: “we are bound to admit that the qualities that characterise the state must also exist in the individuals that compose it. ... It would be absurd to suppose that the vigour and energy for which the northern people like the Thracians and Scythians have a reputation aren’t due to their individual citizens; and similarly with intelligence, which is characteristic of our part of the world, or with the commercial instinct which one attributes particularly to the Phoenicians and Egyptians” (*Rep.* 435e-436a). The same theme is revisited in the examination of deviant communities in Book VIII. Socrates attributes the vices of particular societies to the imbalance of the character of those who compose the communities.

³⁵ Irwin, T., *Plato’s Moral Theory: The Early and Middle Dialogues*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 237.

half of the community's possible resources (*Laws* 805 a-b).³⁶ However, in the *Laws*, Plato reintroduces the family and hence the traditional female role of wife and bearer of children. Consequently, the general propositions about the capacities of the female sex in the *Laws* are simply not put into practice.³⁷

The application of metaphysical knowledge to the worldly and muddled concerns of political management is, however, of questionable benefit to the larger community. The man with knowledge, whether he has knowledge of the eternal, or is a Philosopher King or statesman, is a heroic figure. Applying his heroic abilities to political leadership makes the *polis* he leads equally heroic. A *polis* led by a heroic philosopher should be marked by unity and harmony and will achieve whatever tasks it sets itself better than any other constituted *polis*.

Does the community benefit from philosophical leadership?

Aristotle maintains that the Good was largely useless in guiding human affairs: "It is hard, too, to see how a weaver or a carpenter will be benefited in regard to his own craft by knowing this 'good itself'" (*Ethics* I.6, 1097a).³⁸ Plato never claims that knowing the Good will directly aid the craftsman in his craft. Those of the producing class, and even the auxiliary class, will never know the Good because only the Philosopher Kings will grasp the Good. The philosopher's knowledge of the Good will benefit the craftsman indirectly in so far as it will enable him to live in a united and prosperous *polis*. The craftsman's contribution to the just city is to stick to his craft and accept the rule of the philosophers. Very few people can ever hope to achieve heroic status. Most will simply enjoy the benefits of living in a *polis*

³⁶ Cf. Saunders, T., "Plato's later Political Thought," *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Kraut, R., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 464-492, p. 480.

³⁷ The example Okin uses is Plato's "grand assertions" about the necessity for men and women to participate in the military equally. In the *Laws*, the proposed period of military service for men is from the age of twenty to sixty. Women were allowed, not compelled, to participate in the military until they reached a child-bearing age – twenty at the latest. Women would be excluded during the child-bearing years, and exempted after fifty (*Laws* 785b). With primitive contraceptive methods, the child-bearing years would be long. Okin calculates that this may leave females five years of active military service. Under such conditions, Plato's aim of equal military training and participation for men and women would be impossible to fulfil. Okin, *Women in Western Political Thought*, *op. cit.*, p.49.

³⁸ The reference to the weaver, who in the *Statesman* is analogous to the ideal political leader, cannot be coincidental.

engineered by a philosophical person whilst doing their craft to the best of their ability.

Underlying Aristotle's remark about the carpenter and weaver is a far more serious point that is based on his distinction between practical wisdom (*phronēsis*)³⁹ and philosophical wisdom in Book VI of the *Ethics*.⁴⁰ For Aristotle, abstract knowledge is useless when applied to practical matters. All the philosopher's individual greatness will not necessarily make him a better political ruler. For Aristotle, philosophical wisdom is intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge. Intuitive reason determines first principles or invariables, and scientific knowledge demonstrates these first principles. Intuitive reason will discover that the sum of the three angles of a triangle always equal 180 degrees, whilst scientific knowledge is the skill to demonstrate that this is true.

This is why we say Anaxagoras, Thales, and men like them have philosophical but not practical wisdom, when we see them ignorant of what is to their own advantage, and we say that they know things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless; viz. because it is not human goods they seek (*Ethics* VI.vii, 1141a).⁴¹

Thales became famous by correctly predicting a solar eclipse (c. 585 BC). Aristotle holds knowledge of mathematical principles and laws of nature in the highest regard, but he sees such abstract knowledge as inapplicable to the tasking of managing political affairs.

For Aristotle, only practical wisdom, which can even be found in some animals that have “a power of foresight with regard to their own life” (*Ethics* VI.vii, 1141a), is needed to rule successfully. Practical wisdom is the wisdom that calculates what the best thing a man or a community can attain by action (VI.vii). Practical

³⁹ Also translated as prudence or sound judgement.

⁴⁰ The modern terms for this are ‘practical and contemplative philosophy’. Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, *op. cit.*, pp.242-3 and p.337-8 n.61, and ‘the cognitive and moral aspects of philosophical knowledge’, Klosko, G., *The Development of Plato's Political Theory*, Methuen, New York and London, 1986, p.146.

⁴¹ Thales (c. late seventh to early sixth century BC) was a Greek mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher, as was Anaxagoras (c. 500-428 BC).

wisdom is the knowledge of a diet that leads to a healthy constitution, or the application of medicine.

It is for this reason that we think Pericles and men like him have a practical wisdom, viz. because they can see what is good for themselves and what is good for men in general; we consider that those can do this who are good at managing households or states (*Ethics* VI.v, 1140b).

Practical knowledge is gained through experience, not abstract contemplation. Thus Aristotle goes on to say that it is thought a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found because he has no experience (*Ethics*, VI.viii).

The Platonic philosopher falls into Aristotle's category of philosophical wisdom because he is contemplating the Good that is presented as an immutable law of nature. For Plato, the Good is a metaphysical reality; it exists and it would continue to exist even if no one ever knew it existed. Aristotle's assessment of the practical utility of the Good is reinforced by Aristoxenus' report that on seeing Plato lecture on the Good a wider audience was left bewildered by what they considered to be numerical 'mumbo-jumbo':

They came, he [Aristotle] used to say, every one of them in the conviction that they would get from the lectures some one or other of the things that the world call goods; riches or health, or strength, in fine, some extraordinary gift of fortune. But when they found that Plato's reasonings were of sciences and numbers, and geometry, and astronomy, and of good and unity as predicates of the finite, I think their disenchantment was complete (*Harmonics*, II, 30).

While this is only a confirmation of Aristotle's opinion, the fact that Plato's lecture on the good would be so abstract in nature is consistent with its presentation in the *Republic*, Book VI. The numerical aspect of the Good given in the lecture may also explain the confounding claim that the philosopher is exactly 729 times happier than the tyrant (*Rep.* 587e). It is impossible to know for certain because the lecture on the Good has been lost.

Aristotle's criticism that the Good is useless in guiding human affairs is considerably more complex than the flippant remark about knowledge of the Good

not assisting the weaver (*Ethics* I.vi, 1097a). For Aristotle, the ability to predict a solar eclipse or determine patterns in nature is the highest good a human can pursue because it is divine, but it does not help in the running of a successful *polis*. One suspects that Plato was aware of the practical limitations of knowledge of the Good in social organisation. Even within the *Republic* it is not clear how knowledge of the Good will help the rulers mould souls through education, propaganda and censorship, or provide the knowledge to run the eugenics program, or train for war, or provide the ability to negotiate with other states. The final educational step before proceeding to view the Good is the fifteen years of administrative training. Knowledge of the Good is impossible to achieve without long years of acquiring practical knowledge. Plato shared Aristotle's belief that practical wisdom was largely the result of experience. This would indicate that Plato might have had some hesitations in ascribing leadership to those who lacked practical knowledge and that knowledge of the Good, whilst essential, was by itself insufficient to ensure good rule.

The best political leadership, for Plato, is the application of abstract knowledge of the Good to organisation and administration of the state. Plato's silence on how this could, in practice, be achieved would seem to further confirm his reservations on the usefulness of knowledge of the Good in practical affairs of the *polis*. The criticism that Plato never applies his notion of the Good to ethics or politics has been most forcibly taken up by Karl Popper who writes:

But this formal information is all we get. Plato's Idea of the Good nowhere plays a more direct ethical or political role; never do we hear which deeds are good, or produce good, apart from the well-known collectivist moral code whose precepts are introduced without recourse to the Idea of the Good.⁴²

Popper concludes that Plato's Good is "quite useless."⁴³ The only use that Popper identifies for the Good is to enable an elite who claims access to knowledge that eludes others to establish a blueprint for totalitarianism. Likewise, for Elshtain, the

⁴² Popper, K., *The Open Society and its Enemies: The Spell of Plato*, [Fourth Ed.] Routledge, London, 1962, pp.145-146.

⁴³ Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, *op. cit.*, n.18, pp. 237-8.

“intolerance of plurality, diversity, debate [and] distinct human voices”⁴⁴ marks the *Republic* as the prototype of all subsequent strains of totalitarianism.⁴⁵ To criticise the *Republic* because it “exemplifies a purely abstract vision of a future condition which bears no relation to humans-in-history, with no coherent connection to some recognisable past and the beings who lived in it”⁴⁶ does not move beyond what Socrates himself clearly recognised by insisting that it is a Republic “in speech” (*Rep.* 472d). The facile charge of totalitarianism against Plato ignores the subordination of the individual to the state in Greek thought. The Greek conception of state was what may now be labelled perfectionist. As Barker noted, “[t]he individual and the State were so much one in their moral purpose, that the State was expected and was able to exercise an amount of coercion which seems to us strange.”⁴⁷ Plato, like his contemporaries, put the state before the individual possessed with modern rights. For the Greek, citizens only had rights and duties in relationship to their role in the *polis*. It is therefore anachronistic to accuse Plato of subordinating the individual to the state, unless all Greek political thinkers are put on trial as co-defendants.⁴⁸

Popper’s assertion that Plato is a proto-fascist is overly polemical, but the criticism of the uselessness of a metaphysical basis to ethics places him alongside Aristotle, and many of his concerns with the *Republic* have been shared, in a more restrained manner, by many Platonic scholars. The *Republic*’s failure to apply the Good to anything is in direct contrast to Plato’s extensive definition of justice. The *Republic* shows us what a just act, person and *polis* have in common. There is no

⁴⁴ Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, *op. cit.*, p.40.

⁴⁵ For Elshtain, the intolerance of difference in the *Republic* is worst for women because they are only accepted into the Guardian class in order to facilitate the eugenics program. Women are denied any gender specific virtue, and turned into reproduction machines. Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, *op. cit.*, pp.20-40.

⁴⁶ Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*, *op. cit.*, p.39.

⁴⁷ Barker, E., *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle*, *op. cit.*, p.7. The absence of the distinction between Church and State further contributed to the all encompassing Greek notion of the state.

⁴⁸ Vlastos’ 1977 refutation of Popper has widely been seen as the final nail in the coffin of Popper’s view of Plato as a proto-totalitarian. Vlastos, G., “The Theory of Social Justice in the *Polis* in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Studies in Greek Philosophy* vol.2, ed. Graham, D., Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995, pp. 69-103. The claim that the *Republic* was the proto-type of a fascist state was one that was successfully countered during the war, and before Popper popularised it. See Morrow, G. “Plato and the Rule of Law,” *Presidential address to the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association, Ohio State University, April 26, 1940*. Reprinted in *Plato A Collection of Critical Essays*, Vol.II, pp.144-165.

attempt to show what “common feature all good things”⁴⁹ possess. The failure to apply the notion of the Good is crippling because one is left wondering why the Good is introduced in the first place. A diluted theory of Forms could operate without reference to the Form of the Good. However, if Plato had excluded the Good from the *Republic*, the fundamental problem of reconciling philosophical and practical knowledge would remain because the Forms are just as metaphysical in nature as the Form of the Good, as is the guiding principle of the mean in the *Statesman* and the *Laws*. It is similarly not satisfactory to defend Plato by saying that one does not need to know how knowledge of the Good would benefit social organisation within the *polis* because the *polis* of the *Republic* is not meant to be real and hence questions of the Republic’s foreign policy or problems with guardians recognising their own children in the communal family are irrelevant. Plato needs to show why metaphysical knowledge will assist human life regardless of whether this metaphysical knowledge is knowledge of the Good, the Forms, or simply the theory of the mean.

Klosko has argued that knowledge of the Good provides the philosopher with the right moral grounding to be a ruler. It is the sort of person one becomes by knowing the Good, not the practical information that one receives from this knowledge that is supremely important.⁵⁰ The philosopher who has seen the Good is not interested in material possessions, and is a just and good person. Being a just and good person is a necessary but not by itself sufficient condition to guarantee good political leadership. Nor does it answer how contemplating something that is outside human existence helps guide human affairs, as Plato claims when he describes the philosopher as awake rather than asleep (520c-d), sighted rather than blind (484c-d). One who has seen the Good will genuinely attempt to rule in the common interest because they have transcended self-interest, but lacking practical experience, such a ruler is still liable to make bad decisions. The heroic legislator of Plato’s imagination may well, in practice, be a bumbling political ruler.

⁴⁹ Kraut, “The defence of justice in Plato’s *Republic*,” *op. cit.*, p.322.

⁵⁰ “It is not surprising to see Plato shift between the cognitive and moral aspects of philosophical knowledge, in light of his view that knowledge is bound up with an orientation of desire as well as a cognitive state.” Klosko, *The Development of Plato’s Political Theory*, *op. cit.*, p.165.

The *Statesman* and the *Laws* maintain philosophical rule as the foundation of political legitimacy. They are, however, more sensitive in attempting to involve the wider population in the direction of the polis. The *Statesman* offers a higher ideal to the citizens than the “fawning acceptance”⁵¹ of rulers’ command that is present in the *Republic*. The Eleatic Stranger initially feels the need to distinguish the statesman from a dictator, and he does this by determining that the statesman rules with consent (276e). The distinction between the dictator and the statesman, a distinction Plato never feels the necessity to make in the *Republic*, is made in isolation and seems to contradict the Stranger’s later insistence that consent is not that important. A statesman is one with expertise in ruling: “And it doesn’t matter whether they rule by consent or constraint, whether they use a written code, whether they’re rich or poor – we still regard them as rulers” (293a).⁵² Furthermore, Plato seems more open to the use of violence to enforce political decisions in the *Statesman* than he was in the *Republic*. This is particularly evident in the context of the statesman’s task of weaving the warp and woof. Those who cannot be moulded into either must be expelled or killed.

[Those] driven by their native evil constitution to irreligion, violence, and crime, she [statesmanship] expels by the punishment of death or exile, or visits with superlative infamy [and those] who grovel in gross stupidity and low-mindedness, she reduces to the status of slaves (308e-309a).

In the *Statesman*, the Eleatic Stranger ranks democracy in the middle of six possible constitutions (291d-292b, 302c-303b) reasoning that it is the most ineffectual constitution for either good or bad. He is not making a value judgement on democracy, but simply pointing out that it has the least effect, it is effectively neutral. “It is incapable of being an effective force for either good or ill, because, under this system, authority is broken up into tiny portions and distributed to so many people” (303a). In the *Republic*, by contrast, democracy is ranked below oligarchy and only above tyranny.

⁵¹ Cooper, “Plato’s *Statesman* and Politics,” *op. cit.*, p.92.

⁵² Cf. A doctor who forces a patient into an operation without managing to first persuade the patient of the necessity of the operation. “We’re hardly going to call it an unprofessional defect which will promote ill health” (296b).

It is also argued that the *Statesman* is more open to democratic principles (if not democratic practices) because rhetoric is considered one of the four crafts subordinate to statesmanship. Unless Plato envisaged the possibility of convincing the populace on a regular basis, Cooper argues that there would be no need for the political orator.⁵³ Plato's recognition of the expertise of rhetoric is a departure from his position in the *Gorgias*. This idea is, according to Laks, taken up with even more gusto in the *Laws*. According to Laks' reading, the *Laws* is a critique of the tyrannical nature of any legal system. A law is necessarily an imposition backed with the threat of violence for non-compliance. This defect of legal codes is especially problematic for Plato because of the emphasis he places on unity and cooperation within the *polis*. Hence his insistence on the long version of a legal code that attempts to persuade rather than command the citizens.⁵⁴ The Athenian Stranger of the *Laws* relies on a favourite Platonic analogy to make this clear. A doctor to slaves simply gives a prescription that must be followed, whilst a good doctor for citizens will spend time and effort convincing the patient of the necessity of his prescriptions. Likewise legislation can be written with a view to convincing the citizens of its justification or it can simply compel citizens to obey without justification. A law that persuades is clearly preferable (*Laws* 720-722a). Similarly, a good King persuades rather than compels. The good doctor explains what he is doing to the patient, a bad doctor simply does. Neither is a democratic. Both are applying superior knowledge. The *Laws* attempts to achieve unity by having all citizens marching together, whereas the *Republic* attempted unity by having everyone march to the beat of the Philosopher.

Ultimately for Plato, in both the *Laws* and the *Statesman*, there might be an attempt to convince the population at large of the good that certain measures are aimed at, but if the population is not convinced they will be compelled to follow those laws. The laws are established by a tiny minority – or one *heroic* man – who possesses true knowledge.

⁵³ Cooper, "Plato's *Statesman* and Politics," *op. cit.*, pp. 96-7.

⁵⁴ Laks, A., "Legislation and Demiurgy: On the Relationship between Plato's *Republic* and *Laws*," *Classical Antiquity*, 9(2), October 1990, pp.209- 229, p.223.

Conclusion

The aim of infallibility in ethics and ethics as the keystone to politics is maintained throughout Plato's overtly political texts. Plato's conviction in absolute knowledge is a foreign concept for the modern reader. When debating social welfare, for example, legislators today will argue from the viewpoint of national interest, or on humanitarian grounds, but none would claim that their proposed policies are based on infallible knowledge. For Plato, good legislation is not a question of what is the most beneficial, decent or fair thing to do, but simply what is the correct thing to do. Only philosophers or Kings who philosophise have this heroic knowledge.

The ideal of autocratic rule by philosophers is completely undemocratic. The *Republic* sees no role for the general citizens in decision-making process. They must stick to their own and comply with the philosopher's rule. The later dialogues concede desirability of persuading the populace to willingly comply to philosophical rule, but do not exclude the possibility of enforcing compliance by whatever means necessary. Leadership of the wise excludes the majority of citizens initiating legislation and it deliberately disregards and violently discourages normal citizens holding opinions. A philosophic hero leads for the benefit of all.

Plato's political scheme is premised on the notion that some people are better than others; better in every sense imaginable. The value of some people is objectively and demonstrably greater than others. Each of these three classes is given a metallic value, "when God fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers (which is why their prestige is the greatest); he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest" (*Rep.* 415a). The best should rule. Such ideals cannot co-exist with democracy based on every person being of equal value and holding opinions of equal value.

Plato politicised the notion of heroism by enlisting the heroic philosopher into the service of the state. The hero, on Plato's understanding, was no longer the individual actor concerned with his own welfare envisaged by Homer. The hero was primarily concerned with the advancement of the larger community that made up the *polis*. Plato made the hero into a citizen. Plato's conception of the heroic citizen is incompatible with modern ideals of citizenship. For Plato, very few men had the

capacity to embark on the ascent to philosophy. Rousseau was instrumental in establishing ideals of equal human worth into the widely accepted political lexicon. Rousseau further attempted to reconcile heroic achievement with notion of equal moral worth. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau would propose a polity based on enabling all men to achieve an equal heroic standing by equally partaking in political processes.

PART III

ROUSSEAU:

**The demise of heroism in
political thought**

Chapter 5

Rousseau's heroic *Polis*: lionisation of the common man or a continuation of political elitism?

For Rousseau, the characteristic that defines and distinguishes human beings is independence. The fulfilment of human potential, and consequent heroic achievement conceived as surpassing the human norm, can, therefore, only be obtained with the full exercise of independence. Rousseau famously believed that in his natural, pre-historic condition man enjoyed independence and lived a good life, but every step in the history of human evolution has led man further away from his natural independence and into ever increasing misery. This was the thesis of Rousseau's first published work, the *Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences*, and one that he would restate clearly at the end of his life: "[n]ature made man happy and good, but society depraves him and makes him miserable."¹ Society robs man of his independence, making him dependent on others for both his physical survival and his sense of self-worth, and setting him on a path of degradation and mediocrity. Where civilised men are the norm, a man who regains independence can be considered heroic because he consistently acts in a manner that is beyond the human norm, and he will, for Rousseau, be considered a model for emulation.

Rousseau's prescriptive thought offers his readers both an individual and a collective solution to redressing the inequalities, abuses and dependence men suffer in civilised society.² Both solutions assume that in order to climb the heroic peaks of

¹ Rousseau, J-J., *Dialogues*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, eds., Gagnebin, B. & Raymond, M., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Paris, Vol.1-5, 1959, 1961, 1964, 1969, 1995, v.I, p.934. Henceforth all citations to the *Œuvres Complètes* will be given as *O.C.* followed by volume and page number in Roman and Arabic numerals respectively. All translations from the *O.C.* are my own. The first line of *Emile* reinforces the idea that things had once been good before being corrupted by man. "Everything is good as it leaves the hand of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of men." Rousseau, J-J., *Emile or On Education*, trans. and intro. Bloom, A., Basic Books, 1979, Penguin Classics, 1991, p.37. Henceforth all references to *Emile* will be cited in the text with the page numbers to Bloom's translation.

² Rousseau's individual solution provides redemption for an individual living in a corrupt society. The individual solution can in fact be divided into two different solutions. Firstly, there is *Emile*, who is an ordinary man who is trained to live independently. Secondly, Rousseau, in his late autobiographical writings, offers himself as a model for an individual who soars above society as a result of his own genius. Starobinski, J., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l'obstacle: suivi de Sept essais sur*

human potential, socialised men as a collective, or one man individually, has to regain the independence they all enjoyed naturally. As the conditions required for human fulfilment exist innately in all men, all men are, according to Rousseau, equally capable of fulfilling human potential and achieving heroic status. Extending the possibility of heroic fulfilment to all men represents a major departure from the other models of heroism presented in this thesis. Homer and Plato consider heroism as a strictly hierarchical pursuit only open to an elite category of men. In contrast, by proposing that heroic potential is innate, Rousseau opens the path to heroism for all men, enabling the dream of the heroic to prosper in an historical and political environment that increasingly accepts that all men are of equal ability and equal moral worth.

This chapter examines Rousseau's collective solution whereby the condition of natural independence is artificially recreated in all men who partake in a newly conceived state, which delivers civic and moral liberty as well as equality. Rousseau believes that "[p]eople are in the long run what their governments make of them."³ In the *Social Contract* Rousseau finalises his proposed form of governance that would make citizens independent, equal and heroic. The *Social Contract* not only proposes that all men have the same equal potential, but this opportunity is in fact dependent on the equal realisation of the heroic capacity of all men. Every single man must exercise his full independence by voicing his equal share of sovereignty in a fraternity of heroes, or the system collapses.

The *Social Contract* takes a corrupted, dependent man who had the potential to be good, cleanses him of his corruption and returns him to his natural state of goodness, and then proceeds to make man even better than he had ever been in nature. A political community of the type promoted in the *Social Contract* lifts man from a

Rousseau, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, pp.24-25; Cooper, L., *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1999, pp.1-2, 17-19. Shklar collapses the two individual solutions into one. Shklar, J., *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp.5-11. *Emile* could be considered a collective solution because Emile lives in a small community with his tutor, Jean-Jacques, and the others who surround him.

³ *A Discourse on Political Economy*, trans. Cole G.D.H., [Everyman's Library 1913] in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, Dent & Sons, London, 1973 pp.117-154, p.123. Henceforth in-text citations to Cole's translation will be abbreviated *P.E.* with the page numbers.

good, but stupid and limited beast that he was in nature, to a “creature of intelligence and a man.”⁴ Herein lies the heroic nature of Rousseau’s political project: the *Social Contract* proposes a form of governance that will enable every man to fulfil his potential by providing him with moral and civil liberty. A well-conceived constitution, Rousseau would declare in a later work, will give a Republic “heroes for Citizens.”⁵

The *Social Contract* aims to change the lives of all who live in the community rather than one individual. Hence it is more ambitious and broader in scope than Rousseau’s individual solutions. The *Social Contract* provides every individual the independence of natural man in a vastly enlarged field of action in which to exercise that independence. The *Social Contract* follows Plato’s attempt to realise the practice of heroism within the civil structures of a *polis*, and hence this chapter on Rousseau’s *polis* directly follows the chapter on Plato’s *polis*. The *polis* enables the aggrandisement of the spheres in which a hero can apply his heroism. Rousseau differs from Plato in his belief that for men to achieve heroism within the structures of a state all men must do so equally. Plato made a hero into an elite citizen. Rousseau reshapes the notion of heroic citizenship so that it could extend to all men.

Nevertheless, this chapter argues that the project of the *Social Contract* fails because Rousseau comes to the realisation that men could not meet the demands he places upon them. On my reading, Rousseau became aware that the expectations he places on ordinary men to become heroic citizens are beyond their capacity. Men who have the capacity to be heroic choose to be ordinary. The failure of the magnificently bold ambitions of the *Social Contract* leads Rousseau to adopt two divergent resolutions as to how men can live together in a political association. The first is the aristocratic sovereignty proposed in the *Considerations for the Government of Poland*. Aristocratic sovereignty limits the ambition of heroic fulfilment achieved

⁴ Rousseau, J.-J., *The Social Contract*, trans. and intro. Cranston, M., Penguin Books, 1968, I, 8, 65. Henceforth all citations to the *Social Contract* will be in-text with book number, chapter number and page number to Cranston’s translation.

⁵ Rousseau, J.-J., *Considerations on the Government of Poland and on its Projected Reformation*, in *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed and trans. Gourevitch, V., Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp.177-260, p.227. Henceforth cited in-text as *C.G.P.*, followed by the page numbers.

through political participation to an elite strata of society. It revisits Plato's political elitism and hence does not advance the heroic project. The second resolution Rousseau offers is the rejection of politics as a means to self-fulfilment. This position is most clearly articulated in the *Project for the Constitution of Corsica*, where Rousseau advocates restricting the reach of politics to the barest minimum. The rejection of politics as a means to heroic fulfilment leads naturally to Rousseau's individual solution and sees heroism disappear from the *polis*. The individual solution, examined in the next chapter, offers redemption to an isolated man living a life of heroic independence in a corrupt society. Rousseau's heroic individual lives in defiance of and in isolation from the political associations that surround him, and thus he effectively brings the ideal of heroism back to where Homer had left it – with the dream of a singular man as hero.

Rousseau's prognosis of the human condition

Any examination of Rousseau's thought requires a brief survey of the condition of natural man, as the concept of natural man remains a standard against which all other humans are judged. Two elements of Rousseau's state of nature are fundamental to his project of creating a political fraternity of heroes. Firstly, the unitary nature of the human psyche makes every single man equally capable of achieving psychological independence. Secondly there is, the need to guarantee equality if men are to maintain their independence whilst living together.

A "simple, unchanging and solitary"⁶ creature, natural man lives in isolation with each individual "satisfying his hunger under an oak, quenching his thirst at the first stream, finding his bed under the same tree which provided his meal; and, behold his needs are furnished" (*D.I.*, 81). Natural men, like all other animals, possess "natural desires for what their bodies need and natural faculties for obtaining the things they desire."⁷ Natural man is content and enjoys "interior or psychic harmony, meaning a lack of inner conflict and an equal balance between desires and faculties."⁸

⁶ Rousseau, J.-J., *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, trans. Cranston, M., Penguin Books, 1984, p.85. Henceforth cited in the text as *D.I.*, followed by the page number.

⁷ Melzer, A., *On the System of Rousseau's Thought*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1990, p.49.

⁸ Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, *op. cit.*, p.183.

Whilst natural man's psychic harmony has strong Platonic resonances, Rousseau rejects classical and Christian dualism and adopts a unitary view of human nature. Natural man has psychic balance because he is a "purely physical being" endowed with solely physical "instincts, passions, and faculties."⁹ "Deprived of any sort of enlightenment ... [natural man's] desires do not go beyond his physical needs," which consist of "food, a female and repose" (*D.I.*, 89). He cannot experience an internal struggle between his rational control and visceral desire because no such division exists within him. Natural man is a happy idiot who has no concept of good or evil because he is "pre-moral."¹⁰ Relieved of morality, natural man is without prejudice towards others and he becomes psychologically independent. He is free from the need to impress others or rely on others for his sense of self-worth and hence does not need to act deviously or pretentiously.

The lonely solitary creature that is natural man inhabits the first phase of the natural condition. The first primitive, (pre)tribal and pre-political communities can be seen as the second phase of the state of nature.¹¹ In these first communities, property remains communal and all are politically equal. *Amour propre* (pride) remains in manageable proportions and does not poison humanity. Rousseau claims that it is these primitive communities and not the cold, harsh and lonely world of original man that is the golden age, "the happiest epoch and the most lasting" (*D.I.*, p. 115).¹² Things take a catastrophic turn for humanity with the discovery of metallurgy and agriculture (*D.I.*, p.116). Metallurgy creates a division of labour and people become interdependent for their survival. The metal smith relies on the farmer for his food and the farmer in return relies on the metal smith for his tools. Agriculture follows to supply metal smiths with food and cultivation leads to property. Social inequality is introduced as a metal smith's work becomes more valuable than a farmer's, despite

⁹ Scott, J., "The Theodicy of the *Second Discourse*: The 'Pure States of Nature' and Rousseau's Political Thought", *American Political Science Review*, 86(3), September 1992, pp.696-711, p.699.

¹⁰ Cole, G.D.H., [1913] "Introduction", in *The Social Contract and Discourses*, Dent and Sons, London, 1973, p.xv.

¹¹ On the distinction between the first, pure state of nature which is natural man's original solitary condition and the second phase of nature see Gourevitch, V., "Rousseau's Pure State of Nature," *Interpretation*, 16(1), 1988, pp.23-60.

¹² Rousseau tells his readers that this is the period they would "wish [their] species had stood still" (*D.I.*, p.79).

the fact that they both work equally hard. Inequality cemented by uneven distribution of property and rivalry fuelled by *amour propre* directs men to do anything to improve their relative fortune, creating a Hobbesian state of the war of all against all. The rich and powerful find this war disadvantageous to them because they risk both life and property, so they convince the poor to give up their rights in a fraudulent contract in return for stability. Political inequality is born as people willingly accepted this contract and “all ran towards chains believing that they were securing their liberty”(D.I., p. 122). Having given up their liberty men are debased and defiled. The fraudulent contract is a commercial contract that leaves no place for virtue or goodness, however virtue and goodness are defined. It rewards manipulative, cruel and deceitful behaviour, whilst punishing all noble and giving acts. The fraudulent contract ushers in civilisation and destroys man’s original wholeness.

Civilised man is distinguished from natural man because he is dependent on the opinions of others for his own self-worth and starts to feign qualities he did not have. Once man left nature and entered society:

It was necessary in one’s own interest to seem to be other than one was in reality. Being and appearance became two entirely different things, and from this distinction arose insolent ostentation, deceitful cunning and all the vices that follow in their train (D.I., 119).

In such an environment man reaches his nadir because he is fractured and has lost his psychic harmony. He neglects his true characteristics and begins to exist artificially as a social being. The “social man lives always outside himself, he knows how to live only in the opinions of others, it is, so to speak, from their judgement alone that he derives the sense of his own existence” (D.I., 136). A social and civilised man is, for Rousseau, the very opposite of what is noble and heroic. He is hypocritical because he suffers a disjuncture between his internal desire and his external expression of this desire. Essentially, a civilised man desires one thing, says another and acts in yet a third way. He is caught between the public-spiritedness and selflessness of the true

citizen and the independence and genuineness of natural man. Neither one nor the other, he is conflicted and powerless.¹³

Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. He will be one of these men of our days: a Frenchman, an Englishman, a bourgeois. He will be nothing (*Emile*, Bk I, 40).

According to Bloom, civilised man is “unpoetic, unerotic, unheroic, neither aristocratic nor of the people.”¹⁴ To be whole and consequently happy a man must coordinate desire, speech and actions. He must, like a Homeric hero, say what he thinks and do what he says. In order to become heroic, a man must overcome the stifling dependence he suffers in civilised society and regain the independence he once enjoyed.

In Greek and Christian thought, man can only enjoy the benefits of psychic harmony when he asserts cerebral control over his visceral appetites. Very few people were considered sufficiently equipped to travel this arduous path, which Plato thought required escaping the human condition. However, in Rousseau’s view, the human psyche is unitary and naturally good. Transparency and serenity are valued over wisdom and restraint because embracing what comes naturally will lead to goodness.¹⁵ As anyone, theoretically, has the ability to thrive in what comes naturally, it follows that, for Rousseau, everyone has an equal ability to achieve goodness. This new definition of goodness changed the ideal of fulfilling human potential from an aristocratic ambition to a democratic possibility. Heroic potential, for Rousseau, is latent in all men because all men have the equal potential to bask in psychological independence.

¹³ Cf. Plattner, M., *Rousseau’s State of Nature: An Interpretation of the Discourse on Inequality*, Northern Illinois University Press, 1979, p.4.

¹⁴ Bloom, A., “Rousseau’s Critique of Liberal Constitutionalism,” *The Legacy of Rousseau*, eds. Orwin, C. & Tarcov, N., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, pp.143-167, p.146.

¹⁵ Melzer, *On the System of Rousseau’s Thought*, *op. cit.*, p.22.

As nature provides man with all his needs, he enjoys self-sufficiency, which leads to physical and material independence in addition to psychological independence. Natural man is master to no one and he has no master other than the constraints of nature. Independence, thus conceived, cannot exist without equality:

anyone must see that since the bonds of servitude are formed only through mutual dependence of men and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to enslave a man without first putting him in a situation where he cannot do without another man (*D.I.*, 106).

In nature, all are equal because none has any rights over others. If one man tries to enslave another, the victim can simply run off into the forest and continue his independent existence.

Rousseau's psychology takes for granted that all men have equal potential to reach heroic peaks. His view of physical and material independence as a natural condition of being human makes it necessary that all men recover this condition equally if they are to live well. Rousseau's insistence on the equality of all men in the political sense is most clearly reflected in its incorporation into the American *Bill of Rights* and the French *Declaration of The Rights of Man*. Jaffa, a scholar of the American founding fathers, succinctly captured the meaning of the dictum that "all men are equal."

What does this mean? Not that all men are equal in intelligence, virtue, strength or beauty. They are equal in certain "rights", and the meaning of these rights can perhaps be most easily expressed today in this negative way: *there is no difference between man and man which makes any man, that is, any normal adult human being, the natural ruler of any man.*¹⁶

Rousseau, although not a rights-based thinker, considers that if one man has power over another or rules another, both lose their independence and heroic capacity. The equal dependence and enslavement of both parties in a master-slave relationship is a recurrent and fundamental theme for Rousseau and is starkly expressed at the very beginning of the *Social Contract*: "[t]hose who think themselves masters of

¹⁶ Jaffa, H., *Equality and Liberty: Theory and Practice in American Politics*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1965, p.176. My emphasis.

others are indeed greater slaves than they” (*S.C.*, I, 1, 49).¹⁷ The master is enslaved because he is dependent on the slave as much as the slave is dependent on the master. In order for all citizens to retain independence in a state, all must participate equally in sovereignty so that no one is dependent on, or subordinated to, another. By giving all men an equal part in sovereignty, Rousseau proposes making all men in the polity equally heroic. This is in stark contrast to Plato’s polity in the *Republic* where the elite class of Philosopher Kings use their exclusive knowledge to serve the common good by holding sovereign power whilst the rest of the population simply obey the commands of sovereignty.

Democratising sovereignty

The key to man’s transformation in the *Social Contract* is the ability of every single contractor to retain independence whilst submitting to political authority. The extent of this ambition becomes clear when one considers that Rousseau accepts Hobbes’ argument that the sovereign must be indivisible, inalienable, supreme and absolute in order for unity and stability to be maintained. For Rousseau, however, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*-like sovereign practises sovereignty in the same manner as the Cyclops that Odysseus encounters in the *Odyssey*. Odysseus and his men “lived in peace in the cave of the Cyclops awaiting their turn to be devoured” (*S.C.*, I, 4, 54, *Od.*, 9).¹⁸ The Cyclops offers shelter and protection from external enemies, but arbitrarily plucks his subjects from his cave and eats them. The Hobbesian-style contract requires absolute obedience on one side and absolute authority on the other, the same principle was adopted by Plato in the *Republic*. This denies freedom because it entrenches inequality, and for Rousseau there cannot be freedom without equality. Indeed, as independence is the distinguishing human characteristic, to “renounce freedom is to renounce one’s humanity” (*S.C.*, I, 4, 55).

¹⁷ Cf. “Nobles of Poland, be something more, be men. Only then will you be happy and free, but never flatter yourselves that you are so, as long as you keep your brothers in chains” (*C.G.P.*, 196); “Whoever dares to deprive others of their freedom almost always end up losing his own; this is true even of kings, and even truer of people” (*C.G.P.*, 237); “to lead them as it pleases you, you have to behave as it pleases them” (*Emile O.C.*, IV, 308).

¹⁸ The same reference to Odysseus and the Cyclops is made in *The State of War* ¶ 2, Gourevitch, *The Social Contract, op. cit.*, p.162. Rousseau somewhat unfairly simplifies Hobbes’ *Leviathan* by drawing an analogy with the Cyclops. For Hobbes, a sovereign who jeopardises the safety of his subjects to the extent that the Cyclops does would be an illegitimate sovereign and the contract would become void.

Transferring the right of sovereignty from the people to the ruler, Rousseau writes, is to conclude with Caligula – the emperor who was convinced of his own divinity – either “that kings are gods or alternatively that the people were animals” (*S.C.* I, 2, 51). Strong interprets these passages of the *Social Contract* literally and argues that all previous contracts were unfit for humans: “The *Social Contract* shows us, I think, not what humans are capable of ... Rather it shows what it would mean to make the human available to beings such as we are, whose history has been that of the non-human.”¹⁹ Whilst Strong sees the transformation brought about by contract as making animals into men, I frame this in terms of making men into heroes. Strong’s opinion is premised on considering natural man bestial, and indeed natural man is barely distinguishable from the animals with whom he shares the earth. This was Voltaire’s view in a famous letter to Rousseau on reading the *Second Discourse*: “No one has employed so much intelligence to turn men into beasts. One starts wanting to walk on all fours after reading your book. However, in more than sixty years I have lost the habit.”²⁰ The notion that natural man is bestial has been most forcibly taken up by Plattner in recent times. On this reading, an evolutionary process was the “fortuitous concurrence of several alien events” (*D.I.*, 106) that lifted the beast to a man.²¹ Natural man cannot be bestial because he evolves in a manner that the birds and the bees do not. He leaves his natural state because he is endowed with *perfectibilité*, unlike all other creatures. Natural man’s evolution to a creature of intelligence is not the evolution from beast to man, but from man to hero.

Expressed in the simplest terms, no one in Rousseau’s polity can coerce another person. If a person finds his freedom limited in comparison to another’s, his capacity for fulfilment, self-expression, self-mastery and consequently his ability to

¹⁹ Strong, T., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994, p.103. Robert Wokler asserted somewhat less dramatically that an unequal contract that denies independence removes “all morality from our conduct.” Wokler, R., *Rousseau*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1995, p.59.

²⁰ Voltaire to Rousseau, August 30, 1755, *O.C.*, III, pp.1379-81.

²¹ Plattner, *Rousseau’s State of Nature*, *op. cit.* Meier, too, argued that natural man is “not a human man.” Meier, H., “*Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men*: On the Intention of Rousseau’s most Philosophical Work”, *Interpretation*, 16(2), Winter 1988-9, pp. 211-227, p.221. Gourevitch, on the other hand, claims that in his footnotes Rousseau goes to some length to distinguish man from beast. Gourevitch, V., “Rousseau’s Pure State of Nature”, *Interpretation*, 16(1), 1988, pp.23-60. Cooper adopts a line between the two. Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, *op. cit.*, p.115.

achieve *arētē* (human excellence) is limited because he is no longer independent. Rousseau rejects British representative democracy, where the people are suffering under the illusion that they are free, when in fact they are only free for a fleeting instance as they cast their vote.²² Once sovereignty is relinquished to a representative it is lost. For the purposes of practical expediency, Rousseau accepted the need for an executive system based on an elective aristocracy for the quotidian running of the state apparatus. Rousseau draws a sharp distinction between what he calls government and sovereignty, and this demarcation is essential in the system of the *Social Contract*. He is very particular with his technical vocabulary and he is remarkably consistent in his usage. He famously tells Mme. d'Épinay in a letter to “learn my dictionary” because “my terms rarely have their usual meaning.”²³ For Rousseau, the sovereign establishes the law, whilst “the government” or “the Prince” is responsible for the administration of the laws. In modern parlance, sovereignty is legislative power and government is executive power. In terms of legislative power, “the moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists” (*S.C.*, III, 18, 143). Legislative representation transfers sovereignty out of the hands of the people and renders a state unjust, ill-conceived and invalid because it denies individual independence. A contract that denies independence suffocates the potential of human fulfilment because it denies humans their defining characteristic.

Rousseau’s fundamental position on human freedom demands that a man must never lower himself in front of another, and yet the sovereign must be omnipotent. Rousseau’s ambitious political project rests on resolving the paradox of:

How to find a form of association which will defend the person and goods of each member with the collective force of all, and under which each individual, while uniting himself with the others, obeys no-one but himself, and remains as free as before (*S.C.*, I, 6, 60).

²² “The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is only free during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as the Members are elected, the people is enslaved; it is nothing. In brief moments of its freedom, the English people make such a use of that freedom that it deserves to lose it” (*S.C.*, III, 15, 141). This is in direct contrast to Montesquieu who believed the English to be the freest of all people.

²³ Rousseau, J.-J., *Correspondance complète*, ed. Leigh, R., Institut et Musée Voltaire, Geneva and The Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, Oxford, 1965-1989, III, p.296. Cited in Gourevitch, V., *The Social Contract, op. cit.*, p.xliv. Gourevitch provides an excellent summary of Rousseau’s technical vocabulary with numerous examples of his usage, pp.xliv-liii.

For everyone to retain independence whilst submitting to political authority, all men must partake equally in establishing the laws and rules (sovereignty) by which they abide within the state. This is only possible if every citizen partakes in the writing of laws, or at least actively consents to every law. When this occurs all citizens are effectively following their own rules as determined by “popular sovereignty.”²⁴ Every citizen remains independent under the rule of law because he is both subject and author of the law. In the *Social Contract*, popular sovereignty is expressed directly by the citizen body through the articulation of the general will. The general will enables Rousseau to democratise sovereignty. As participating in sovereignty enables a man to retain his independence in the vastly enlarged field of action provided by a state structure, it empowers him to reach heroic heights. Rousseau is in effect democratising heroism.

The transformation of men living under contract: making all men heroes

The *Social Contract* proposes that natural man is good, but contracting makes him better than he had ever been in nature. Whereas the condition of happy ignorance in nature seemed desirable in the *Discourse On Inequality*, Rousseau came to the appreciation that the men of the “Golden Age remain ignorant boors, whose only intellectual attainment is the acquisition of language.”²⁵ Natural man possessed wholeness and independence, but he failed to achieve anything with these qualities and consequently remained a “stupid, limited animal” (*S.C.*, I, 8, 65). The social contract elevates natural man to a creature of intelligence because it guarantees in law what natural man possessed without even realising it. The contract substitutes natural equality with a “moral and lawful equality” guaranteed by “covenant and by right” (*S.C.*, I, 9, 65).²⁶

²⁴ Miller claims that Rousseau was the first thinker to seriously contemplate popular sovereignty. Miller, J., *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1984, pp.110-113.

²⁵ Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, *op. cit.*, p.23.

²⁶ Natural man’s situation is still nonetheless preferable to the situation of man living in a corrupted society.

The transformative intention of the Rousseauian contract is highlighted by a comparison to previous contract thinkers. For Hobbes, natural man lives in “continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²⁷ Man must enter into a contract to ensure his survival and he willingly exchanges his freedom for the security provided by absolute obedience to a supreme authority. The ambition of the Hobbesian contract is limited to securing life. For Locke, laws secure freedom and life by protecting men and securing their property so that they may prosper.²⁸ Rousseau goes a step further than Locke and seeks laws that breed freedom and virtue and make citizens better people. His contract is not conceived as a necessary limitation on freedom for the sake of survival, nor is it uniquely the guarantee of freedom and basic rights. Rather, the contract enlarges man’s field of liberty and offers the fulfilment of individual and collective potential. The law provides true liberty as a means of self-realisation. The Rousseauian political project is to make man as good as he could possibly be to enable him to fulfil his heroic potential.

The improvement in the condition of men who share equality founded in a constitutional contract is astounding.

We might also add that man acquires with civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man the master of himself; for to be governed by appetite alone is slavery, while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom (*S.C.*, I, 8, 65).

The difference in civic liberty achieved under contract and natural liberty in Rousseau’s thought is akin to Berlin’s two conceptions of liberty. Natural liberty is synonymous with the freedom from constraint associated with negative freedom, whilst civil freedom under laws of which everyone is a joint author is the positive freedom of being “one’s own master.”²⁹ In the Rousseauian state of nature, man’s

²⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 13, Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 186.

²⁸ For Locke, “where there is no law, there is no freedom.” Locke, J., *Second Treatise, Two Treatises of Government* [1690], ed. Laslett, P., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, §57, p.306.

²⁹ Berlin, I., “Two Concepts of Liberty [1958]”, *Four Essays on Freedom*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1969, p.131.

negative freedom is absolute.³⁰ The only factors that control his action are natural ones. He cannot sleep in the bear's cave or jump five metres high, but no person has the ability or desire to limit his realm of action. In nature, a man's field of action is only limited by his own lack of ambition, will and reflection. Natural man can do whatever he wants, but he is satisfied eating berries in solitude. His only ambition is simply to keep living.

Positive freedom, on the other hand, Berlin writes in a passage that would be at home in the *Social Contract*, allows a person to say:

I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer – deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realising them.³¹

For Rousseau, the well-conceived contract makes every male individual somebody. It provides man with, in Berlin's terms, positive freedom. Every man is endowed with responsibility for his community and accorded an equal status in the writing of laws, allowing every citizen to remain free and independent within the larger, expansive freedom provided by law. Negative freedom gave man physical freedom; positive freedom provides him with *liberté morale*. The realm of free action is enlarged under contract and the only limitation on this expanded freedom is self-imposed rationality.³²

³⁰ Wokler describes Rousseau's state of nature as "the most remarkably negative conception of freedom in Western social and political thought" Wokler, R., "Rousseau's Two Concepts of Liberty," *Lives, Liberty and the Public Good: New Essay in Political Theory for Maurice Cranston*, eds. Feaver, G., Rosen, F., St Martins Press, New York, 1986, pp. 61-100, p.75.

³¹ Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty", *op. cit.*, p.131.

³² Both the negative and positive conceptions of freedom in Rousseau's thought rest on the absence of dependence and domination, which are the inevitable restraints and oppressions of inequality. Rousseau, himself, may have rejected drawing a division between negative and positive freedom in his thought, rather insisting, as Viroli does, that the republican liberty offered in the *Social Contract* provides both negative and positive freedom. Viroli maintains that the freedom provided by contract: "is positive because it involves obedience to laws which have been sanctioned by individual men; it is negative because the sovereignty of the law protects each and every one from the wrongs, the affronts and the wilful infringement of their rights by others, whether they be private individuals or magistrates." Viroli. M., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the "Well-ordered Society"*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p.11. Whilst perhaps sharing a common basis, the superiority of civic freedom over natural freedom is clearly maintained in the *Social Contract*.

The freedom of nature leaves a good man how he is and the freedom of contract makes this same good man better. Rousseau's portrait of man under contract is one of the most eloquent and attractive tributes to the social and moral potential of the human species ever articulated. The well-conceived contract transforms man from a "stupid, limited animal", who is enslaved by his appetite, into a man who shares in civic equality, moral freedom and self-mastery. Man under contract has fulfilled his enormous innate potential and becomes heroic, no less.

Rousseau insists at the start of the *Social Contract* that he aims to establish a "legitimate and sure principle of government taking men as they are and laws as they might be" (*S.C.*, I, preface). "Taking men as they are" cannot refer to men as they were in nature because such men no longer exist. Rousseau's stated aim, then, is to create the best possible form of government that can accommodate the failings and merits of men as they exist in contemporary society. It soon becomes apparent, however, that Rousseau wants to rectify human failings and then create a state for the perfected man. Men, as they were in the condition in which Rousseau saw them, were completely incapable of exercising popular sovereignty because they were conniving, dishonest and acted only in their own self-interest. Rousseau's thought is premised on the belief that good laws have the power to transform the citizens living under those laws. The proposed method of governance in the *Social Contract* cannot work for "men as they are." The *Social Contract* is only sustainable for men who undergo the miraculous transformation affected by living under good laws. The need to transform men to realise the good polity is a consistent component of Rousseau's political oeuvre. It is starkly expressed in the earlier *Discourse on Political Economy* and restated in the *Considerations for the Government of Poland*.³³ The *Social Contract* can make people heroic, but it is simultaneously dependent on people embracing their heroic potential to articulate their natural independence in the noble

³³ "If it is good to know how to deal with men as they are, it is much better to make them what there is a need that they should be" (*P.E.*, 127). Cf. "To shape a government for a nation is most likely a useful thing, I, however, know of something even more useful, that is to shape a nation for the government." *Geneva Manuscript*, (a draft version of the *Social Contract*) *O.C.*, III, p.1726. The public needed to be prepared for the burden of freedom. Rousseau stresses the need to "make the serfs who are to be emancipated worthy of freedom and capable of tolerating it," (*C.G.P.*, 196-197) because "[f]reedom is hearty fare, but hard to digest" (*C.G.P.*, 198). The need to transform and teach men is omnipresent in book II chapters 7-10, and elsewhere in the *Social Contract*. "Nations, like men, are teachable only in their youth; with age they become incorrigible" (*S.C.*, II, 8, 88).

sphere of political action by participating in sovereignty. My reading of the *Social Contract* is premised on the fact that Rousseau came to the realisation that men could not or would not meet the heroic demands of political participation. Confronted with the inability of men to become worthy participants in political sovereignty, Rousseau buttresses his system with the introduction of political mechanisms and institutions that would undermine the central principle of popular sovereignty making it impossible for men to fulfil their heroic potential through exercising popular sovereignty.

The general will and the demands of popular sovereignty

The general will makes its first appearance in the *Political Economy*, and it reappears in the *Social Contract* to reconcile individual liberty, equality and independence in a polity. Rousseau conceives of the state as “an artificial person ... which consists of the union of its members” (*S.C.*, II, 4, 74). Like any person, the state therefore has a will and this is the general will. It resides in equal part in every citizen, who is imbued with both a private will and his share of the general will. The general will considers what is good for the state as a whole and the private will considers what is good for the individual. For example, there may be a proposition before the legislative assembly for the state to commission new ships for its navy. It would be in a ship-builder’s private interest to pass this legislation. If the ship builder votes based on how he will profit, he is expressing his private will; if, on the other hand, he considers the state’s actual need for the ships, he is expressing his part of the general will. The incentive for people to vote according to the general will is that, as members of the community, they will benefit from the amelioration of the common condition.³⁴

When it is first presented in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau proposes a magical formula of cancelling out conflicting opinions in order to arrive at the general will. “But if we take away from these same [individual] wills, the pluses and minuses which cancel each other out, the balance which remains is the general will” (*S.C.*, II,

³⁴ As Rousseau explains: “The commitments which bind us to the social body are obligatory because they are mutual; and their nature is such that in fulfilling them a man cannot work for others without working at the same time for himself” (*S.C.*, II, 4, 75). Where a man cannot work for himself without working for others, he cannot harm another without harming himself.

3, 72-73). Rousseau does not elaborate on this proposed formula, which has left many readers bewildered. Whilst some commentators have tried to make sense of this obscure formulation,³⁵ others have argued that the general will can only be interpreted as a metaphysical entity that exists externally from the community. According to Talmon, the general will is like a “mathematical truth, or a Platonic idea.”³⁶ It is a metaphysical truth that must be expressed unanimously because once discovered “the human mind simply cannot honestly refuse to accept it.”³⁷ Talmon famously concludes that such a metaphysical entity can only be discovered unanimously with the coercive powers of a totalitarian regime.³⁸ He interprets Rousseau’s notorious dictum that those who refuse to obey will be “forced to be free” (*S.C.*, I, 7, 64) as an honest declaration of totalitarian intent that will be enforced by whatever means available.³⁹ On Talmon’s reading, it is impossible to view Rousseau’s intention of democratising heroism through the exercise of popular sovereignty because sovereignty is dictatorially imposed by someone who claims to understand the general will.

Yet the general will can only be seen as a metaphysical concept or a serious and literal legislative tool by those who would impose a rigid and doctrinaire approach to the general will. Rousseau himself does not apply a strict accordance to abstract ideals. He places so many qualifications on the general will that he concludes that the island of Corsica is the only place in the whole of Europe where it might function in a pure form (*S.C.*, II, 10, 96). He must also have had doubts about the effectiveness of the general will even in Corsica because it is notable by its absence

³⁵ See Trachtenberg, Z., *Making Citizens: Rousseau’s Political Theory of Culture*, Routledge, London & New York, 1993, pp.7-29, dealing with factions pp.32-55, and the enforcement of the general will, pp.55-75 *ad passim*.

³⁶ Talmon, J., *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, Seeker & Warburg, London, 1955, p.41.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Berlin and Bertrand Russell drew the same conclusions as Talmon. Russell went as far as proclaiming that Hitler was an inevitable “outcome of Rousseau.” Russell, B., [1946] *The History of Western Philosophy; and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1957, p.711.

³⁹ “Forcing men to be free” cannot be dismissed as an unfortunate turn of phrase because Rousseau restates the principle later in the text: “it is only the force of the state which ensures the liberty of its members” (*S.C.*, II, 12, p.99). Talmon’s interpretation of Rousseau is based uniquely on an interpretation of the abstract element of the general will and ignores the practical qualifications that Rousseau proceeds to place upon the general will.

when he comes to deal with the island specifically in the *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* [1765]. The first of the provisos that are placed on the general will relate to the time, place, history and size of the polity, and largely echo Montesquieu's claim that good laws are not universal.⁴⁰ Rousseau remains silent on issues such as terrain and culture in the *Second Discourse*, and one can only assume that the state of nature is fundamentally the same everywhere. Rousseau wants to hold on to a universal ideal, but his reading of Montesquieu persuades him that different climates and terrains give rise to different types of people who require different types of laws and political institutions.⁴¹ The limitations on how and where the general will can operate clearly demonstrate that Rousseau did not presuppose the efficacy of a metaphysical entity or universal principle as our infallible guide for human affairs. The general will does not, as Talmon assumes, lead necessarily to political authority exercised by an elite whose authority derives from metaphysical knowledge in the style of Plato's *Republic*. The general will is a genuine attempt to enable every citizen to fulfil his full human potential by exercising sovereignty over his political community in addition to retaining his self-sovereignty. The failure of the general will rests on people's inability to exercise popular sovereignty.

The ideal of citizens placing the common good before private interest whilst partaking in political deliberation is one that has been taken up recently by proponents of deliberative democracy. Modern proponents of deliberative democracy often try to distance themselves from Rousseau because they believe that he agitates against a pluralistic society and equally against a pluralistic conception of the individual.

⁴⁰ Broadly speaking *Social Contract* II, 8 – III, 18 deals with the limitations of where and how popular sovereignty might hope to function. Masters has noted that these qualifications have “unfortunately been ignored by political scientists.” Masters, R., “Rousseau and the Rediscovery of Human Nature” *The Legacy of Rousseau*, eds. Orwin, C. & Tracov, N., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, pp. 110-140, p. 125. The reason they have been ignored, I would suggest, is that they add very little to Montesquieu's treatment of similar issues.

⁴¹ Vaughan comments on the growing influence of Montesquieu on Rousseau whilst he was in the process of writing the *Social Contract*. “General Introduction,” *The Political Writings of J-J Rousseau* [1915], ed. and intro. Vaughan, C., v.I & II, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1962, v.I, p.3. By the time of writing the *Government of Poland*, Vaughan suggests Rousseau had fully digested Montesquieu and in fact surpasses the “master” because he supplements Montesquieu's theory with notions of history and culture.,” “Introduction To *Government of Poland*,” v. II, p.383. Fabre disputes Vaughan's assessment of the “growing influence of Montesquieu and claims that Rousseau always considered the *Social Contract* and Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* as “complémentaires.” Fabre, J., *O.C.*, v.3, n.3, p.1742.

Homogenous societies do not fit within the liberal paradigm that writers like Warren and Sandel are operating in.⁴² The work of deliberative democracy theorists, however, can help elucidate how the processes that are vaguely described in the *Social Contract* might operate.

When debating public policy, proponents of deliberative democracy maintain that citizens' deliberations must be based on "public reasons."⁴³ This excludes arguments based on private beliefs such as religion or personal motivation and favours propositions that are based on shared or "public" justifications. Festenstein offers a synopsis of this central tenet of deliberative democratic theories that would sit well with Rousseau's notion of determining the general will.

The discipline which deliberative politics imposes on its participants is that they attempt to arrive at reasons which are both genuinely justificatory and could be widely shared ... the grounds offered cannot be purely egoistic. I cannot argue that some solution to a problem be favoured merely because it accords with my views or benefits myself.⁴⁴

⁴² Warren writes: "In designing political procedures that would evoke the General Will, Rousseau supposed a social homogeneity and structural simplicity rare even in his day, while implicitly seeking a unified form of community that is no longer possible, even if desirable." Warren, M., "Conclusion", *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Warren, M., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 346-360, p.346. Much the same argument is made in Sandel's chapter "Republican Freedom: Difficulties and Dangers" in *Democracy's Discontent* Sandel, M., *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1996. Cf. Marks, J., "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Michael Sandel and the Politics of Transparency", *Polity*, XXXIII (4), Summer 2001, pp.619-642. It is, I believe, wrong to suggest that Rousseau seeks homogeneity and unanimity. It is only the original contract that requires unanimous acceptance, a point shared by all contract theorists (*S.C.*, IV, 2, 152). On all other issues, Rousseau's search for unanimity within the sovereign body is founded on the assertion that laws will be more effective when they accord with and reinforce public standards of morality. As Rousseau would explain in the later *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, "the law's disapproval is only effective when it confirms one's own judgement" (*C.G.P.*, 189). If private gain is put aside and people genuinely seek what is best for the state as a whole, Rousseau believed that it might be possible in a healthy polity to achieve near unanimity. "The greater the harmony that reigns in public assemblies, the more, in other words, that public opinion approaches unanimity, the more the general will is dominant" (*S.C.*, IV, 2, 151). Unanimity is desirable, but not essential, for Rousseau.

⁴³ Festenstein, M., "Toleration and Deliberative Politics", *Toleration, Identity and Difference*, eds. Horton, J. & Mendus, S., Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999, pp.146-162, p.148.

⁴⁴ Festenstein, M., "Toleration and Deliberative Politics", *op. cit.*, pp.146-162, pp.149-50 and 152-3. Festenstein cites Elster, J., "The Market and the Forum", *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, eds Elster, J. & Hyland, A., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, pp.103-22; Gutmann, A., "The Virtues of Democratic Self-Constraint", *New Communitarian Thinking*, ed. Etzioni, A., University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 1995, pp.154-69; Miller, D., "Deliberative Democracy and Social Choice", *Prospects for Democracy*, ed. Held, D., Polity, Cambridge, 1993, pp.74-92; Warren, M., "Democratic Theory and Self-Transformation", *American Political Science Review*, vol.86, 1992, pp.8-32. Cf. Warren explains the process in a similar vein: "Successful communication requires

Offering public reasons in debate is the same as being guided by Rousseau's general will or Aristotle's common good. By arguing and thinking in terms of the common good, citizens come to identify their individual good with the good of the whole and experience "the total alienation of each associate of himself and all his rights to the whole community" (*S.C.*, I, 6). The ability of people to partake in political sovereignty, in Rousseau's scheme of direct popular sovereignty or indeed any republican or deliberative democratic scheme, is premised on their intellectual and personal growth as a result of partaking in this sovereignty. As Festenstein explains:

[p]eople who are compelled to offer arguments in terms of public reasons will over time begin to think in terms of public reasons, and will tend not to conceive of their own interests or identities as opposed to public statement.⁴⁵

The fundamental notion underpinning any participatory model of democracy is that "[p]eople achieve their full human potential only when they partake in collective affairs."⁴⁶ The "transformational processes"⁴⁷ and "the generative nature of political interactions"⁴⁸ are the only means of producing citizens who are capable of meeting the epistemological demands that participation in political sovereignty places upon them. Dewey argues that:

Free communication is a means of developing a free mind as well as being a manifestation of such a mind, and it occurs only when

understanding the cognitive content of the statements of others. Even if one disagrees with the statement, even if it is merely the beginning of an argument, in responding to the cognitive content of a claim, one must recognise the other person as a speaker." Warren, M., "Democratic Theory and Trust", *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Warren, M., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 310-345, p.342.

⁴⁵ Festenstein, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁶ Phillips, A., "The Politicisation of Difference: Does this Make for a More Intolerant Society", *Tolerance, Identity and Difference*, eds. Horton, J. & Mendus, S., Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1999, pp.126-145, p.132.

⁴⁷ Warren, "Democratic Theory and Trust", *op. cit.*, p.340

⁴⁸ Warren, M., "Introduction", *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Warren, M., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 1-21, p.20.

there exists sharing, partaking, in common activities and enjoying there results.⁴⁹

Rousseau is equally aware that “men would have to have already become before the advent of law that which they become as a result of law” (*S.C.*, II, 7, 87) for his proposed system of government to function.

The general will can only function when men subordinate their interests to the common good. For men to place the general will above the private will, their nature must be changed, and Rousseau believes, at least initially, this to be possible. “Reform the opinions of men, and their morals will be purified of themselves. Men always love what is good or they think is good, but it is in their judgment that they err, hence it is their judgment that has to be regulated” (*S.C.*, IV, 7, 174). For Rousseau, like Socrates, people are basically good, but they lack the proper means of measuring good and bad in particular circumstances. “The people is never corrupted, but it is often misled; and only then does it seem to will what is bad” (*S.C.*, II, 3, 72). Socrates had insisted that “no one is willingly morally bad or does willingly wrong actions” (*Prot.* 345e). For Socrates, only knowledge will give people the ability to measure moral and ethical dilemmas correctly (*Prot.* 357-358). Rousseau, through the conduit of laws, and like Plato before him, wishes to show men how to measure correctly.

Law and education are, for Rousseau and Plato, aspects of the same project because all laws are “but trifles ... of the one great thing namely education and nurture” (*Rep.* IV, 423). For Rousseau, legislation is a form of education because “[t]he opinions of a people spring from its constitution; although the law does not regulate morals, it is legislation that gives birth to morals” (*S.C.*, IV, 7, 174). The legal code is seen as an educational tool. Thus, Rousseau is emphatic that Plato’s *Republic* is a text on education:

Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato’s *Republic*. It is not at all a political work, as think those who judge

⁴⁹ Dewey, J., “Religion and Morality in a Free Society” in *Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-52*, ed., Boydston, J., Southern Illinois University Press, 1981-2, Vol.15, p.182. Cited in Festenstein, M., “Toleration and Deliberative Politics”, *op. cit.*, p.152.

books only by their titles. It is the most beautiful educational experience treatise ever written (*Emile*, p.40).⁵⁰

Education through law is a life-long exercise. Education is the “State’s most important business” (*P.E.*, 78, 223) and, if undertaken properly, it might even remove the need for legislation altogether. In Sparta “where the laws concerned mainly the education of children. ... Lycurgus established morals so well that it was almost unnecessary to add laws” (*D.I.*, p.131). Education in Sparta taught children so well that they became sufficiently virtuous adults who did not need to be restrained by an ever-increasing array of laws.

Once all the qualifications on the general will are considered, it comes to resemble Aristotle’s insistence that the good polity is one that considers the common interest above personal or factional interest. It differs from Aristotle because every citizen *must* participate in determining the common interest. Finding an individual who will place the common interest above his own is a difficult task; finding a collective where they all do so appears to be near impossible. Rousseau eventually comes to display a level of realism that is rarely attributed to him. He seems genuinely to believe that men could exercise sovereignty and reclaim their independence as he himself had. However, he was confronted with a reality where very few men had the capacity to overcome their civilised natures and regain their innate natures. The general will fails because of the limitations of common men.

In order to meet the legislative demands placed on them and take sound and responsible legislative decisions on all aspects of statecraft, Rousseauian citizens must digest massive tracks of information. Legislative responsibility is a heavy burden and the expectations placed on citizens of a Rousseauian democracy can only be met by exceptional, omnicompetent sovereign citizens. Such citizens must be heroic. As Rousseau clearly warns, the moment citizens lose their interest in political participation the state conceived in the *Social Contract* collapses. Civilised men, like Rousseau’s contemporaries in the eighteenth century, however, remained apathetic

⁵⁰ For the interrelation of law and education in Plato and Rousseau see Ellis, M., *Rousseau’s Socratic Aemilian Myths; A Literary Collation of Emile and the Social Contract*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1977.

and self-interested and refused to make sacrifices in order to achieve a higher good for themselves and their fellows. These “civilised men” dreaded the effort required to overcome their limitations. When confronted with a fork in the road, Rousseau concludes, men will choose the easy downhill path to mediocrity rather than the uphill climb over obstacles on the path that leads to heroism. It is the citizens’ inability to meet these conditions, and not the metaphysical nature of the general will, that destroys Rousseau’s ambition of universal male fulfilment through political engagement.

The failure of the omniscient sovereign citizen

To express openly what one believes to be in the common interest in a manner that does not rest on personal interest, citizens must be properly informed on a myriad of issues that compose the legislative concerns of a state. They must also have ethical and moral frameworks that enable them to judge and evaluate this information and claim knowledge of the effects of legislation. The expectation on all citizens to inform themselves on legislative issues and judge what is in the common interest, requires a leap of faith in the citizen’s cognitive and epistemological capacities. In sum, every citizen must be invested with the art of statesmanship. Plato considered the art of statesmanship so complex and difficult that the genius of the true statesman was the realisation that he could not do it all himself.⁵¹ The true statesman understood that statesmanship must be subdivided into subsidiary arts that would be practised by experts in each area. The expertise of statesmanship was to weave these subsidiary roles together.⁵² Rousseau’s scheme of direct popular sovereignty relies on every single citizen mastering statesmanship. Even in the most modest-sized state anyone who tried to understand all legislative issues would be engulfed in a sea of information.

⁵¹ Rousseau mistakenly believes that Plato’s description of the kingly man in *The Statesman* is that of a Prince – in Rousseau’s understanding of the term as administrator (*S.C.*, II, 7, 84). The kingly man in the *Statesman* is the very unlikely prospect of a man who can rule wisely in the absence of a set legal code. He is effectively, in Rousseau’s terminology, both the Prince and the Sovereign.

⁵² The analogy of a statesman as a master-weaver who integrates the work of contributory arts of weaving is the clearest articulation of this description of statesmanship (*Statesman*, 297b-283b).

For the American journalist and social commentator Walter Lippmann, the fundamental problem with democracy is that voters are unable to be sufficiently informed to offer meaningful opinions on all the political and social problems. It is not that people are too stupid, it simply comes down to the fact that no one has the capacity to inform themselves properly on every aspect of the enormous legislative apparatus of a modern state.⁵³ Lippmann considered that if he, whose profession it was to watch public business, could not express an informed opinion on all public matters, no one could, including the President or a political scientist.⁵⁴ Lippmann does not mention Rousseau, but his reservations about democracy in America in the 1920s would have been even more strongly felt in a “Rousseauian” democracy where the obligations on citizens extend far beyond the need to vote for representatives at general elections. Rousseau’s envisaged polity obliges voters to partake in the continual formation and revision of all legislation. Such a demand is not feasible because it relies on every individual accessing and processing more information than is humanly possible. Such a task, for Lippmann, is simply beyond human capacity. The nature of the problem is one that no amount of public education or patriotic fervour can hope to solve, as Rousseau himself would come to discover.

Rousseau was not the first thinker to take the leap of faith in a citizen’s ability to contribute to legislative power. However, he is unique in demanding this ability from every citizen, where the citizenry was so broadly conceived as to include all male adults, on every legislative proposal. Protagoras had maintained that because Zeus gave every man the ability to distinguish between right and wrong, “virtue [is] something in which no one can be a layman if there is to be a city” (*Prot.*, 327a). According to Protagoras, every citizen has the literarily god-given right to partake in

⁵³ In the *Public Opinion*, Lippmann’s conclusions are measured and he held out some hope that advances in electronic media would provide people with enough information, quickly enough to inform them sufficiently to make the democratic process viable. Lippmann, W., *Public Opinion*, Macmillan, New York, 1922. By the time of writing the sequel, *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann had lost all hope. Lippmann, W., *Phantom Public*, Harcourt, Brace, New York, 1925. Whilst *Public Opinion* was publicly well received, *The Phantom Public* was not. Steel, R., *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, Little, Brown & Co., Boston and Toronto, 1980, chapter 17 “Tyranny of the Masses” pp.211-219.

⁵⁴ Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, *op. cit.*, pp.20-21.

debate in political and moral issues in the *polis* (*Prot.*, 320d-328d, esp. 322a-324d).⁵⁵ Rousseau considers that man's natural self-sovereignty qualifies him to contribute to state sovereignty. The demand Rousseau makes upon his citizens exceeds that of Protagoras because all citizens must partake in all political deliberation. In the context of the system established in the *Social Contract*, as people disengage from their sovereign duty they no longer coordinate their self sovereignty with their political sovereignty and the problem of dependence re-emerges. All citizens must undertake the heroic task of contributing to all legislative matters because "[a]s soon as someone says of the business of the state – "What does it matter to me?" – then the state must be reckoned lost." (*S.C.*, III, 15, 141).

Protagoras did not expect every citizen's input to be equally valuable. Rousseau's scheme of popular sovereignty, by contrast, not only relies on the citizens' equal capacity and desire to evaluate all aspects of legislation, it presupposes that the citizen body as a whole is the best judge of solutions to particular legislative concerns.⁵⁶ Lippmann concluded, with Burke before him, that the only things the public should be asked is who are the best people to rule.⁵⁷ Not only should the public not be pressured into any other involvement, it should be actively prevented from doing so because it does not know what it is doing. In fact, one suspects that for Lippmann even elections might be stretching the capabilities of the electorate. More recently this position has been adopted by critics of deliberative democracy. Hardin argues that:

it is implausible that we can democratically assess who is the smartest or most competent person in many areas of endeavour. For example, democratic choice of whose views on AIDS, secondary education, or the design of a new aircraft are best would plausibly be a travesty.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ The same argument is put forward in Pericles' funeral oration, Thucydides, *History of The Peloponnesian Wars*, II, 40.

⁵⁶ Cf. "Romantic thinking of the type represented by Rousseau produced a tightly linked chain of ideas: from the glorification of the child and natural goodness, to glorification of the common people, to glorification of democracy as the collective self-expression of goodness." Gairdner, William, "Jean Jacques Rousseau and the Romantic Roots of Modern Democracy", *Humanitas*, 12(1), Spring 1999, p.77. Downloaded infotrack 30/6/2002, p. 5of 6.

⁵⁷ Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, *op. cit.*, p.108.

⁵⁸ Hardin, R., "Do we want Trust in Government", *Democracy and Trust*, ed. Warren, M., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 22-41, p.33

Hardin's bemoaning of trusting ordinary people with knowledge of specific areas of expertise has a strong resonance with Socrates, especially the Socrates of the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*. Protagoras is pummelled by Socrates for believing that every citizen had the necessary skill to make a worthwhile contribution to the art of legislating. This, for Socrates, was paramount to seeking leadership by the ignorant. Plato wants to reduce the number of people who hold legislative power to a tiny minority of exceptional and highly trained men. Rousseau wants to extend legislative power to all men.

By linking independence and equality, Rousseau changed the political landscape and trapped himself – and all those who would follow him – into insisting on universal male participation in sovereignty, later to be extended to include the entire adult population. Rousseau extends the ambition of achieving human fulfilment through partaking in collective affairs to all men, unlike previous republican thinkers such as Aristotle, Cicero and Machiavelli, who maintained that the fulfilment of heroic human potential through political fulfilment was the privilege of the few.

Rousseau, however, held severe reservations about the common man's ability or desire to make a meaningful contribution to legislation. The heroic ideal of the "omnicompetent, sovereign citizen," which places demands on people that far exceed human capacity, leads Lippmann to conclude that it is a false ideal. "I do not mean an undesirable ideal. I mean an unattainable ideal, bad only in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer."⁵⁹ Rousseau's scant regard for the men around him, whom he would come to describe as the "common herd" and "a blind multitude, which often does not know what it wants" (*S.C.*, II, 6, 83), contrasts sharply with his underlying belief in human potential. Rousseau wishes to uphold the ideal of an omnicompetent sovereign citizen, but he holds serious reservations about most people's ability to meet the ideal. For Rousseau, Lippmann's fat man could conceivably lose weight in order to become a ballet dancer and thus, it is not, strictly speaking, an impossible ideal, but it is highly improbable. It is improbable for men,

⁵⁹ Lippmann, *Phantom Public*, *op. cit.*, p.39.

on an individual level, to exercise meaningful legislative power, but it is clearly unrealistic to expect all men to. Plato believes that the proper exercise of legislative power in all areas was simply beyond most people, but was within the grasp of an heroic elite. Plato's view is premised on the metaphysical aspect of knowledge and the transferability of true knowledge to the field of political organisation. Rousseau believes that the exercise of responsible legislative power was possible for all, but he is restrained by his opinion of those very masses who are to hold this legislative power. In its actual condition as he saw it, the public for Rousseau, "often does not know what it wants, because it seldom knows what is good for it" (SC, II, 6, p.83). Rousseau's contempt for his contemporaries is reflected in his language:

Those sages who insist on speaking in their own language to the vulgar will not be understood. ... Perspectives which are general and goals remote are alike beyond the range of the common herd; it is difficult for the individual who has no taste for any scheme of government but that which serves his private interest, to appreciate the advantages to be derived from the lasting austerities which good laws provide (*S.C.*, II, 7, 86).

It is clear that, for Rousseau, the "vulgar ... common herd" who cannot comprehend general and remote goals cannot exercise legislative power. The people must be prepared and moulded by a superior being before they are ready to exercise sovereign duty.⁶⁰ This superior being is the lawgiver who is belatedly introduced to the polity outlined in the *Social Contract*. The lawgiver becomes the real hero, relegating the common citizens to a less than heroic status.

In the *Social Contract*, the lawgiver writes the constitution for a state then retreats, playing no further role in either the government (administration) or sovereignty (legislation) of the state (*S.C.*, II, 7, 85). The lawgiver is "a superior intelligence" (*S.C.*, II, 7, 84) whose "great soul is the true miracle which must vindicate his mission" (*S.C.*, II, 7, 87). In the *Considerations of Poland*, Rousseau identifies only three true lawgivers in all of history, Moses, Lycurgus and Numa (*C.G.P.*, 180). This is barely surprising when Rousseau finds "in the work of the

⁶⁰ In the *Considerations for the Government of Poland*, Rousseau stresses the need "to make the serfs who are to be emancipated worthy of freedom and capable of tolerating it" (*C.G.P.*, 196-197).

lawgiver two things which look contradictory – a task beyond human powers and a non-existent authority for its execution” (*S.C.*, II, 7, 86). The role of the lawgiver is not *theoretically* necessary in Rousseau’s radical scheme of direct popular sovereignty. The lawgiver is introduced to compensate for the average citizen’s inability to meet the requirements of popular sovereignty. The introduction of the heroic lawgiver signals the collapse of the fraternity of heroes.

The heroic lawgiver and the end of heroic equality

Direct popular sovereignty was Rousseau’s answer to the problem of human dependence in societal life. Every man was to partake in guiding his individual and collective destiny by participating equally in sovereignty and thus retaining self-sovereignty whilst living under political authority. Theoretically, the lawgiver is not essential to this ideal. If the people are to legislate for themselves, there is no logical reason why they should not be able to formulate their own constitution. Indeed, the lawgiver’s continual influence through the constitution he leaves is contrary to the ideal of popular sovereignty. The people’s right to hold sovereignty is effectively squeezed out by the omnipresent influence of the lawgiver and the executive’s application of legislative issues. The people’s role is diminished to a point where it becomes almost inconsequential and their actions are merely products of the lawgiver’s miraculous mind. Such people can no longer be considered heroic, according to Rousseau’s understanding of self-sovereignty as essential to heroism because they live in a legislative framework that they did not themselves establish.

The lawgiver directs and moulds other men in much the same way as the Philosopher King of Plato’s *Republic*. The common man’s fulfilment of his human potential is consequently less than that of the lawgiver. Therefore, the common man cannot, by definition, be considered heroic because he has, compared to the lawgiver, clearly failed to achieve the fulfilment of human potential. In Rousseau’s scheme, the average man is given the same treatment as Thersites, the common man in the *Iliad* who is bashed down and silenced by his superior, Odysseus; the common man in Rousseau’s polity is silenced by the continuing influence of the lawgiver. In theory, after the constitution is established the lawgiver is absent, but his influence is a

continual presence.⁶¹ The extent of the continuing influence of the lawgiver is magnified by Rousseau's political conservatism.

The *Social Contract's* repeated warnings about the dangers and difficulties of changing existing constitutions are often overlooked because they are surrounded by such a radical agenda. In the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* [1771], Rousseau's conservatism is impossible to overlook because it is stated repeatedly and unequivocally. Thomas Paine's famous words directed against Burke's conservatism are equally applicable to the lawgiver who is guilty of "[t]he vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave", which Paine considered "the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies."⁶² The lawgiver reigns from the grave because his constitution continues to preside over men who are scared and reluctant to change the laws they have inherited because of the burden of tradition.

In practice, the lawgiver's continual influence could too easily become a continual presence that moulds or completely usurps the common people's popular sovereignty. This is precisely what happens in the *Considerations for the Government of Poland*, where Rousseau conflates the lawgiver with legislative authority and, consequently, the seepage of sovereign authority from the people to a highly trained and enlightened man or body of men is complete. The bell tolls on the dream of a fraternity of heroic citizens all benefiting equally in the transformative power of political sovereignty.

The *Considerations of the Government of Poland* and Rousseau's acceptance of aristocratic sovereignty

In the *Considerations on the Government of Poland* Rousseau is presented with an opportunity to apply his radical abstract ideals to a real case scenario.⁶³ Rousseau

⁶¹ It would take a very rare individual to establish a constitution and then voluntarily abstain from playing any role in the prosperity of that constitution, but Rousseau recognises that the lawgiver is such a rare person.

⁶² Paine, T., *The Rights of Man* [1791], Penguin Classics, 1984, pp.41-2.

⁶³ The Confederates of the Bar, a faction of Polish nobles, had turned to various Western political thinkers for advice on how to reform Poland. *Considerations on the Government of Poland* is Rousseau's response to this request.

does not advocate radical or sudden change. Indeed, the whole work is pervaded by repeated warnings to “[n]ever shake up the machine too brusquely” (*C.G.P.*, 259). The Poles are cautioned of the dangers of changing a longstanding constitution from the very start of the work:

Brave Poles, beware; lest for wanting to be too well, you only make your situation worse. ... Correct the abuses of your constitution, if it is possible to do so; but do not despise the constitution that made you what you are (*C.G.P.*, 178).

It is wrong, however, to suggest that the “theme reiterated” to the Polish is simply to “change nothing.”⁶⁴ Rousseau tried to adopt the political ideals he had established in the *Social Contract* to a real historical example. Any reformer is faced with the choice of working within the confines of the actual constitution in order to effect gradual change, or annulling the present and wiping the slate clear to start over from scratch. Rousseau favours evolution over revolution. This does not indicate that he chose to abandon his ideals. His conservatism relates to the implementation of those ideals.

The many references to the *Social Contract* in *Considerations of the Government of Poland* provide ample evidence that Rousseau had not simply abandoned his earlier ideals. The *Social Contract* is referred to by name five times in the seventh chapter alone, and there numerous of explicit references to the ideals and political institutions expounded in the earlier text.⁶⁵ In the *Considerations*, Rousseau does not shy away from his most explosive and controversial terminology: the “general will” and the “lawgiver”. In Rousseau’s oeuvre, the term “the general will” is laden with meaning for any reader with even cursory knowledge of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau was fully aware of the weight that terms such as the general will carried, and his use of this terminology here cannot be considered haphazard, imprecise or simply careless. In the *Letters from the Mount* [1764], where Rousseau also takes a conservative reformist position, the term “general will” is quietly abandoned in favour of “la volonté de tous” (the will of all) even when he is

⁶⁴ Kendall, W., “Introduction”, *Jean Jacques Rousseau, The Government of Poland*, trans. and intro. Willmoore Kendall, Hackett Publishing Press, Indianapolis, 1985, pp.xiv-xv.

⁶⁵ “Means of Maintaining the Constitution”, *C.G.P.*, pp.197-211

summarising the position of the *Social Contract*.⁶⁶ Rousseau knew the power of his terminology and he also knew how to moderate that terminology. The only explanation for Rousseau's use of the terminology of the *Social Contract* in the *Considerations* is that he is invoking the ideals of the earlier text for the readers of the present text.⁶⁷

The *Considerations* shares many features with the *Social Contract* and the rest of Rousseau's political oeuvre. Rousseau advocates that the Poles should promote patriotism, cultural isolationism, simplicity of manners and customs, and military virtue. The importance of education and the obsessive fear of men becoming effeminate⁶⁸ also feature heavily in the *Considerations*, as in Rousseau's other political texts and the two discourses. One cannot simply disconnect the *Considerations* from the rest of Rousseau's oeuvre as there is a clear attempt to implement the main features of his theoretical scheme to a real case scenario. Nevertheless, applying the ideals of the *Social Contract* to a feudal country, such as eighteenth-century Poland, whilst maintaining the essential components of the Polish constitution entailed the need to make compromises. Rousseau took great care to inform himself on the Polish constitution, apparently to a greater extent than the other dignitaries who had been asked for advice.⁶⁹ Only the nobility, about ten percent of the population, were fully enfranchised. The term most frequently used to describe Poland at the time was "feudal anarchy".⁷⁰ The other distinguishing feature of the Polish political and economic landscape was the massive disparity of wealth, leading to Rousseau's famous comment that "[t]he Polish nation is composed of three orders:

⁶⁶ *Lettres écrites de la montagne*, Sixth Letter, *O.C.*, III, p.807. For further commentary on Rousseau's use of terminology in the *Letters from the Mount* see Vaughan, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Political Writings II*, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-5.

⁶⁷ It is worth pointing out that Rousseau never intended the *Considerations* to be published for a broad audience. The only intended audience were the Confederates of the Bar who commissioned the work.

⁶⁸ The word "effeminate" is used on four occasions in three pages, *C.G.P.*, 186-9.

⁶⁹ Fabre, J., *O.C.*, v.3, n.5, p.1742.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* Fabre quotes Rousseau's contemporaries, Coyer and Joncourt, who wrote: "Royal dignity with the name Republic; laws with feudal anarchy (l' anarchie féodale); traits informed by the Roman Republic with Gothic barbarity." Fabre considers that this was a common sentiment for anyone writing on Poland.

the nobles, who are everything, the bourgeois, who are nothing, and the serfs, who are less than nothing” (*CGP* 194).⁷¹

The central ideals of the *Social Contract* were direct popular sovereignty expressed through the general will and a sharp distinction between legislative power and executive power. In the *Considerations*, Rousseau maintains the need for a sharp divide between executive and legislative authority (*C.G.P.*, 200), but he compromises on the issues of representation, popular sovereignty and he blurs the role of the lawgiver.

In the *Considerations*, Rousseau accepts representative aristocratic sovereignty, a form of legislative authority that could not be further from the direct popular sovereignty, which was the central ideal of the *Social Contract*. Representation on some levels is a compromise that any proponent of direct democracy writing in the era of modern states must eventually accept.⁷² Direct democracy in legislation is, in practical terms, unfeasible in a large state and was only maintained in Ancient Greece by the exclusive nature of citizenship and the small size of the city-states. Representation, however, contributes to what Rousseau considered the central flaw of all political societies: it recreates dependency. The fulfilment of the human condition comes through the exercise of independence. In a state this could only come through direct involvement in legislative authority. With representation the individual loses control over his sovereignty because he becomes dependent on his representative – as Rousseau himself pointed out when criticising British democracy in the *Social Contract* (III, 15, 141).

In the *Considerations on Poland* sovereignty is only extended to the nobility, who themselves elect representatives to directly exercise sovereignty. Despite

⁷¹For an overview of Poland as it was when Rousseau wrote the *Consideration on Poland* see Gourevitch, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, *op. cit.*, pp.177-260 and pp.310-312; Fabre, J., *OC III*, pp.1733-1804 especially n.1 pp.1735-1741 and n.5 p.1742; and Vaughan, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Political Writings II*, *op. cit.*, pp.369-409.

⁷² The importance that current proponents of deliberative democracy place in “political trust” is an acknowledgment of the need for some representation.

claiming that aristocratic sovereignty was “the worst form of sovereignty,”⁷³ the acceptance that only the elite element of society would be empowered with sovereignty was already present in the *Letters from the Mount* [1764]. In that text, Rousseau’s first foray into applying the principles of the *Social Contract* to a concrete political reality (in this case Geneva), when he refers to “peuple genevois souverain,” he only envisages “les Citoyens et les Bourgeois” and deliberately ignores the other three quarters of the population who compose the “habitants” – foreigners allowed to reside in Geneva and “natifs” – descendants of habitants.⁷⁴ Rousseau’s acceptance of aristocratic sovereignty signifies the defeat of his ambition of a fraternity of heroes all equally fulfilling their human potential by exercising their independence in a state by participating in sovereignty.

In the *Considerations on Poland*, Rousseau uses the terms Sovereign, legislative authority and lawgiver interchangeably (*C.G.P.*, 197). The interchangeability of Sovereign and legislative authority is common to the *Social Contract*. However, in the earlier text the lawgiver is distinctly separate from the sovereign. The term lawgiver is used three times in the seventh chapter of the *Considerations*, in the third, tenth and twelfth paragraph (p.197, 200, 201), where Rousseau could have simply used “legislative authority.”⁷⁵ As with his references to the “general will” in this text, Rousseau’s use of “lawgiver” marks a direct link for the reader to the *Social Contract* and the ideas on governance expounded there. In the *Social Contract*, the lawgiver’s retreat was essential to maintaining popular sovereignty because, if he were to remain in a position of public authority, sovereignty would reside with him and not the people. In stark contrast, in the *Considerations*, Rousseau refers to the “the continuous presence of the lawgiver” which preserves the legislative authority of the Diet (p.197), the national assembly. The lawgiver is the Diet and it acts as a continual legislative presence upon the government. The enlarged role that Rousseau attributes to the lawgiver shows

⁷³ *O.C.*, III, p.809.

⁷⁴ Candaux, J., *O.C.*, III, pp.cxcvii-iii.

⁷⁵ The first time it is used it is ambiguous whether the lawgiver is an individual or a body of people, the second time it is clearly singular and the third time it is the “Lawgiver as a body.” This distinction is not essential. In the *Social Contract* the lawgiver is presented as a single man, but the task could just as easily be completed by a committee.

precisely how the people can be squeezed out of their role of sovereign as it was established in the *Social Contract*.

Rousseau's advice to the Poles on practical matters is tantamount to the denial of the people's right to exercise self-sovereignty. When Rousseau explains his proposal for the selection of the King, the total seepage of sovereignty from the people to a representative aristocratic body becomes clear. An elaborate process culminates in the election of the King by the members of the National Diet. The members of the Diet are elected by the members of the local Dietines from amongst their own ranks. The members of the Diet are effectively the representatives of the representatives of the Dietines, who are themselves representatives of ten percent of the people of Poland. Yet in discussing the election of the King by the members of the Diet, Rousseau refers to the central role of the "Nation" (p.251 three times) and the "Republic" (p.252 once) in choosing the King.⁷⁶ Within his oeuvre, Rousseau uses the term nation in either the sense of a state or in terms of a people. In the present context nation is used for the people (*le peuple*) in the sense of "The French people or nation" (*S.C.*, I, 6, 62). Rousseau abandons popular sovereignty entirely and in doing so abandons the hope that political organisation can be a progressive influence in the quest for human fulfilment and heroism for all men.

Rousseau does make genuine pleas that the Poles should aim to loosen the restrictions preventing the majority of the population from entering public service, and he gives a number of practical suggestions on how this could be done. Rousseau envisaged a "graduated" (p.247) process of emancipation of the serfs into citizens and the political process. A transition from representative democracy of the nobility to popular representative democracy offers a genuine political and social promotion of the peasants into citizens rather than an immediate amelioration of their situation.⁷⁷ Rousseau's ideal of emancipation of the lower classes in the *Considerations* is the same as Plato's in the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, no individual with the sufficient

⁷⁶ The King would be "a man of merit, capable, in the judgement of the nation, of wearing the crown with honour, and finally, ... he would ... be nevertheless dependent on the subsequent and formal choice of the Republic" *C.G.P.*, 252. Cf. p.251 where Rousseau talks of "the Nation freely choosing ... the Nation will take care not to choose him"

⁷⁷ *OC*, IV, n.1 p.1797

intellect and determination is systematically excluded from joining the ruling classes, regardless of their social background. Likewise, Rousseau envisaged that at some point the serfs of Poland would no longer be excluded from the processes of sovereignty and governmental authority. However, the structures of authority he recommends would continue to be organised in a hierarchical system. Even if this system is founded on merit, it remains exclusive and, like the *Republic*, the system would see an elite controlling sovereignty on behalf of the vast majority of the population. Aristocratic sovereignty, even when understood as sovereignty practised by the best people regardless of birth, denies popular sovereignty and consequently self-sovereignty for all. In the *Social Contract*, the denial of self-sovereignty amounts to a denial of heroic status.

The *Social Contract* offered hope, or at least portrayed an ideal, that all men could achieve heroic status by equally partaking in sovereignty. Even so, the introduction of the lawgiver was indicative of Rousseau's doubts about the ability of most men to achieve this ambition. The *Considerations on the Government of Poland* gives full voice to the reservations of the *Social Contract*. The ideal of heroic achievement through controlling one's personal sovereignty within a state is lost. Rousseau abandons popular sovereignty as a miraculous transformative tool turning men into heroic citizens. Political organisation is renounced as a means of enabling all men to exercise independence and overcome the problem of societal dependence.

Before the writing of the *Considerations* in 1771, which advocates aristocratic sovereignty as a means of overcoming the difficulties associated with popular sovereignty, Rousseau had written the *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* [1765], which advocates that political association can only have a corroding effect on the lives of those in the *polis*. The advice given to the Corsicans is to limit as much as possible the reach and influence of political authority to minimise the impact of political institutions. Rousseau considers that in all of Europe the Corsicans are the closest approximation to the pre-civilised communities lauded in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Politicising Corsicans would only serve to denature them and hence make them more miserable than they are.

Abandoning politics

Corsica was renowned for its lawlessness and the absence of an indelible mark left on the political landscape by any form of government. Unlike Poland, Corsica would have provided a radical reformer with the much dreamed of blank canvass on which to paint a radical new system of government. Rousseau had noted in the *Social Contract* that it was the only place in Europe where the general will may hope to function. Yet in 1765, when Rousseau was invited to offer his suggestions to a newly independent Corsican government, the resulting *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* is conspicuous by its lack of political ambition. Its ambition does not extend beyond showing humanity that even if the evils of society are irreversible they can nonetheless be resisted. If there are still good people somewhere they should be left alone instead of mocked for their simplicity and naivety.⁷⁸ This is not a model for the future, but a eulogy for the past, and a plea to let simplicity survive in the few places where it still exists. The Corsicans cannot be considered heroic when measured against the ideal presented in the *Social Contract* because they do not exercise political sovereignty. However, these lawless Corsicans should be envied rather than ridiculed by the so-called civilised nations of Europe because they still enjoy a share of natural independence as it was found in the primitive communities identified as the second phase of nature in the *Discourse on Inequality*.

Popular sovereignty in the *Social Contract* collapses because Rousseau considers the “common men” who comprise the “common” and “vulgar” “herd” (*S.C.*, II, 6, 83-6) to be incapable of processing the extraordinary amounts of information required to make meaningful legislative decisions. The *Considerations of the Government of Poland* resolves this issue by transferring sovereignty to an aristocracy, whereas the *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* overcomes the same problem by reducing the functions of the state so that there are not many issues for the sovereign body to resolve. The easiest way to simplify the state is to reduce its size. A small state will have fewer legislative concerns thus overcoming the problem of the excessive demands sovereignty places on the citizens. Furthermore, the small state provides the citizens with more freedom. When sovereignty is divided between fewer people, everyone has a larger share (*S.C.*, III, 1, 103-104). The ideal figure Rousseau

⁷⁸ Starobinski, J., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit.*, p.24.

gives is 10,000, which is roughly Plato and Aristotle's optimum population (*Laws*, 737e; *Politics*, 1326b).

When we see among the happiest people in the world bands of peasants regulating the affairs of state under an oak tree, and always acting wisely, can we help feeling a certain contempt for the refinements of other nations, which employ so much skill and mystery to make themselves at once illustrious and wretched? (*S.C.*, IV, 1, 149)⁷⁹

The oak tree that satisfied man's hunger in nature now satisfies his political desires under contract in the simplest communities. Rousseau recognises that "a state thus governed needs very few laws" because a "band of peasants" is not a state, but a community. The legislative problems confronting a disparate group of Swiss hillbillies would merely consist in deciding what to do with the stranger who has come to settle in the valley. In his *Project for the Constitution of Corsica*, Rousseau recognises the Swiss mountaineers as "men without rulers and nearly without laws" (*Corisica*, 915). A peasant community does not need to regulate issues of a modern state such as taxation and defence because it is a pre-political society surviving from the golden age of humanity described as the second phase of nature in the *Second Discourse*.

The *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* is an attempt to eschew the modern world and does so by transposing the principles of the *Second Discourse* to the realm of politics. The aim of the constitution, Rousseau advises the Corsicans, should be to promote isolation and introspection in order to maintain self-sufficiency as a means of guaranteeing independence (*Corsica*, 903). Self-sufficiency and consequently independence is the aim for both individual Corsicans and the island as a whole. The advice given to the Corsicans to be insular and to magnify their differences to the rest of Europe echoes that given to the Poles. Polish school children, it was recommended, should be imbued with a sense of national history and

⁷⁹ The benefits of a small state are also praised in *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, "Almost all small States, republics as well as monarchies, prosper simply because they are small, because all the citizens know and watch one another. ... It is astonishing, it is wondrous that the vast expanse of Poland has not already a hundred times converted its government into a despotism, bastardised the Poles' souls, and corrupted the mass of the nation" (*C.G.P.*, p.193). Cf. "The Dedicatory letter to Geneva", Rousseau, J-J., *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men*, trans. Cranston, M., Penguin Books, 1984.

pride. The Poles were warned against exogamy, and encouraged to feel “a natural revulsion to mingling with foreigners” (*C.G.P.*, 184). Likewise, the *Project for Corsica* advises the Corsicans to avoid becoming a modern state and to remain instead an impoverished rural community. “It is less a question of becoming different to what you are, but knowing how to remain as you are” (*Corsica*, 903).

Rousseau wants the Corsicans to replicate the rural ideality of his imagination (*Corsica* 915-17). Rousseau proposes to the people of Corsica a model that is predicated on the Switzerland of his dreams.

When we see the unwavering steadfastness, the consistency and the fierceness that these fearsome [Swiss] men carry into battle, resigned to die or to defeat their enemy and not even having the idea of separating their lives and their freedom, we no longer have any difficulty in conceiving the prodigies that they have achieved in the defence of their homeland and their freedom. We are no longer surprised to see that the three most powerful countries and the most bellicose troops of Europe have successively failed in their machinations against this heroic nation whose simplicity has protected it against ruses and whose courage has rendered it invincible against valour. Corsicans, here is the model you should follow in order to return to your primitive state (p.915).

The Swiss and the Corsicans are heroic in relation to civilised Europe, but would be simple, limited animals in relation to the citizens of a nation that implemented popular sovereignty and the other ideals of the *Social Contract*. Rousseau proceeds to mourn the corruption of the once simple Swiss and hopes the Corsicans can avoid a similar fate. There is no grand political ambition driving Rousseau’s proposals for the Corsicans. Other than the guiding principal that they should resist the encroachment of the modern world, the only practical suggestions relate to putting an end to the neglect of elementary governmental duties to enforce basic law and order. The infamous Corsican reputation of being highway men, rapists and carrying out never-ending revenge and honour murders is well merited in Rousseau’s view and has resulted from continual governmental inability to punish the offenders. Rousseau stresses the need to address this situation and prevent offenders from continuing to act against basic laws with impunity. There is nothing particularly Rousseauian or indeed insightful about this recommendation.

The small state with limited political dilemmas is more akin to the lost state of nature than the modern world. Even in eighteenth-century Europe, the small city-state was fast becoming a feature of the past; a past that could be mourned, but could not be exhumed and revived. The small and simple Corsican-style state more closely resembles a Homeric-style community than a fully fledged *polis*. Rousseau was acutely aware of the fact that such rural pre-political communities were a feature of the past and he proposes a federated state as the means to keep the benefits of a small state whilst obtaining the necessary advantages, namely security, of a large state. Rousseau's federalism is never developed and would no doubt have been a part of the large work on politics that he never completed (*S.C.*, III, 15, 143; *C.G.P.*, 194).

On my reading, Rousseau was convinced that true independence as a means to human fulfilment could only be achieved in a political association, that is a state, by the exercise of popular sovereignty. He attempted in the *Social Contract* to conceive of how popular sovereignty could function. Confronted by the limitations of men, he came to the realisation that it was an ideal that could not be made to work despite its obvious appeal. The solution of the lawgiver to overcome common men's inability to write legislation for themselves could not have been entirely satisfactory for Rousseau because the lawgiver mitigates against the exercise of popular sovereignty. Unable to overcome common men's limitations, Rousseau renounced his search for political solutions to the dilemma of societal independence. Rousseau's failure to complete his larger political project would indicate that he had lost interest in the state solution to the problem of societal dependence. This loss of interest is affirmed by his personal withdrawal from political issues. After the publication of *Emile* and the *Social Contract* it had been Rousseau's intention to withdraw from public matters. He writes in the *Confessions*: "I was determined ... to totally abandon high society, writing books as well as being associated with literature, and till the last of my days to take refuge in the narrow and peaceful enclosure for which I felt destined from birth."⁸⁰ Rousseau did not entirely withdraw from public life as he was persuaded into writing both the *Project for the Constitution of Corsica* and the *Considerations on the Government of Poland*. I suspect that Rousseau's ego was unable to resist the

⁸⁰ Vaughan, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Political Writings II, op. cit.*, p., 369. Vaughan cites two letters expressing a similar sentiment.

invitation to give his views on Corsica and Poland. The *Project for Corsica* does not, indeed, betray Rousseau's aim to abandon politics because it advocates the abandonment of politics. The *Considerations* reflects that Rousseau lost hope and optimism in the transformative power of a well-conceived political association because it abandons the transformative elements of the *Social Contract*.

Conclusion

Rousseau, like Plato and Homer before him, was saddened and dismayed at the condition in which his fellow men lived. For Rousseau, all existing political associations denied men their independence and created subjects who were manipulative, deceitful, weak, slavish and effeminate. Man did not need to be like this; he could be grand, noble and achieve so much more than he did. In order to fulfil his enormous human potential, a man must be free, that is, he must enjoy independence. As the ability to practise independence was in man's innate nature, all men had the equal potential to fulfil their potential. Rousseau was instrumental in establishing the equal potential of all men, an ideal that continues to flourish to this very day.

To be the best a man could be, he had to be free. To be heroic, a man needed to exercise his independence. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau proposed a revolutionary new system of political sovereignty that would enable all men to rule themselves whilst benefiting from the personal aggrandisement that only participation in a civil political association could provide. For Rousseau, as it had been for Plato, participation in political association was the only environment in which men could truly prosper. The *Social Contract* forms men into heroic citizens by enabling them to exercise independence in a political association. The practise of independence, however, could only be truly realised in the presence of equality. Rousseau played a fundamental role in establishing the enduring ideal of egalitarianism into political landscape. He dreamt of a new type of social and political organisation that enabled all men to be equally heroic rather than equally ordinary. He found, however, like all

other creators of heroes, that “the very idea of the superior man assumes an aristocratic notion of human hierarchy.”⁸¹

The need for human equality in determining popular sovereignty would be adopted by mainstream political thought and institutionalised after its incorporation in the French and American revolutions. Thus, the ideal of equality survived Rousseau, but the ambition of a fraternity of heroic citizens did not. The collapse of popular sovereignty signalled the end of political projects that aimed to create heroes. It did not, however, signal the death of heroic man, because there was still one hero, and that was Rousseau himself. The next chapter will examine Rousseau’s personal pursuit of heroic ideals as it is outlined in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*.

⁸¹ Goldberger, A., *Visions of a new Hero: the heroic life according to André Malraux and earlier advocates of human grandeur*, Lettres Modernes, Paris, 1965, p.9.

Chapter 6

Rousseauian Man: Rousseau as the model for heroic man

This chapter argues that the great change in Rousseau's work towards the end of his life stems from his loss of confidence in the ability of his fellow men to achieve their full human potential and reach heroic heights. But he never lost faith in his own ability to do so. Rousseau saw the problem of humanity and the possible redemption of humanity through the example of his own life. As an enthusiastic young scholar he had firmly believed that other men could follow his path and achieve heroic heights by regaining their natural and innate independence. Later in his life, Rousseau appears to have lost his belief that other men could be like him.

The path to heroism outlined in Rousseau's autobiographical writings is premised on a man disengaging from social interaction in order to regain the physical and psychological independence of natural man. Natural man was a solitary creature, so the supreme human life built on replicating natural man excludes political or even social interaction. When Rousseau portrays the last years of his life as the supreme life, he limits ideals of heroism to individual men. In fact, Rousseau's heroism is individualised to a greater extent than Homer's because the solitary walker has no interaction with the outside world.

The model of individual redemption concentrated on in this chapter is depicted in the *Reveries of The Solitary Walker* [written 1776-78, published posthumously 1782] and in the second part of the *Confessions* [1764-1770]. In these autobiographical texts, Rousseau presents himself as a man who, having been rejected by his fellow men and with his heart "purified in the crucible of adversity,"¹ has overcome the abuses of society, and regained his natural independence and his consequent psychic harmony and happiness. He fulfils his potential and achieves greatness by becoming independent, a man without a master, and whole by correlating his desires and actions by overcoming the gap between being and appearance. Thus

¹ *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. France, P., Penguin Books, 1979, Walk 1, p.33. Henceforth cited in text as R.S.W., with the number of the walk (chapter) and the page number.

he regained what Starobinski labelled the “lost transparency” of pre-social man.² Rousseau’s solitary walker is a synthesis of Homer’s hero of instinctual action and Plato’s contemplative philosopher. This is an extraordinary project because it requires reconciling two contradictory doctrines. Rousseau proposes to use his reason, in the manner of the Platonic philosopher, to achieve the emotive and visceral action that marks the Homeric hero.

The rewards and benefits that a civilised man can hope to draw from restoring his independence diminish significantly between the *Social Contract* and the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The *Social Contract* offers a wondrous improvement in the condition of men who partake in a shared independence. It enables them to grow and prosper as individuals. It takes a civilised man corrupted through time, and, in the terminology established by Isaiah Berlin, returns the negative freedom he enjoyed in nature and in addition imbues him with positive freedom. In contrast, the personal independence Rousseau claims to enjoy in his late autobiographical works is unconditional negative freedom. It is the freedom to reject all constraints and obligations placed upon his person. Rousseau paints an unedifying, or at least self-absorbed, picture of himself as someone who desires to be free of any obligations to ensure his own survival, free of obligations to others, and free of the obligations to any creative drives. This might not, at first glance, appear to be a very noble or heroic life, but complete and utter independence from human society is a monumental ambition. In the process, Rousseau comes to see himself as god-like. Presenting a self-absorbed and self-sufficient solitary walker as an heroic ideal, he abandons the notion of obligation to the community exercised through political leadership in the Platonic dialogues and political participation in the *Social Contract* as an essential criterion to heroic fulfilment.

Emile or Rousseau

Rousseau offers two vastly different visions of individual redemption for a man living in a corrupt society. The first is expostulated in *Emile*, published in the same year as the *Social Contract*, 1762. Emile is a man of ordinary gifts who reaches great moral

² Starobinski, J., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau. La transparence et l’obstacle: suivi de Sept essais sur Rousseau*, Gallimard, Paris, 1971, p.24.

and spiritual heights because he is educated to remain independent and self-sufficient whilst living in a corrupt society. In the second version of individual redemption, Rousseau, in his late autobiographical works, presents himself as a man who has rediscovered his natural transparency and in doing so has become a quasi-divinity.

My emphasis is on Rousseau's self-portrait as the heroic character who succeeds in escaping the constraints of society by soaring above it. Emile, unlike Rousseau himself, does not exceed the human norm that his tutor, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, artificially creates for him. Emile is the product of his upbringing. His achievement, whilst admirable and exemplary, is not heroic because it is not the highest condition man can obtain. Emile is the model of fulfilment for an average man. He has been "chosen from among the ordinary minds (*esprits vulgaires*) to show what education can do for a man" (*Emile*, 245). His education has taught him not to fracture and weaken himself by living according to the opinion of others, and consequently, he is buttressed against the vices of society – hypocrisy, envy and avarice.³ Emile, however, is another model of an ordinary man failing to achieve the heroism that is available to him. Emile fails to grasp independence and the book finishes with the soon to be father pleading with his tutor to remain and guide him and his family through life. "But remain master of the young masters. Advise us and govern us. As long as I live I shall need you. I need you more than ever now that my functions as a man begin" (*Emile*, 480).

Cooper rightly observes, "[t]he most exalted life to be found in Rousseau's corpus is not Emile's but rather his own, that is the life of the philosopher, as depicted in the late autobiographical writings."⁴ The highest type of life for Rousseau, like Plato, is the self-sufficiency of the contemplative philosopher. It is the "solitary walker of the *Reveries* whose experience of life is god-like."⁵

³ Velkley, R., "The Tension in the Beautiful: On Culture and Civilization in Rousseau and German Philosophy," *The Legacy of Rousseau*, eds. Orwin, C. & Tarcov, N., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, pp. 65-86, p.73.

⁴ Cooper, L., "Human Nature and the Love of Wisdom: Rousseau's Hidden (and Modified) Platonism," *The Journal of Politics*, 64(1), February 2002, pp.108-125, p.108.

⁵ *Ibid.*

The journey of introspection culminating in self-sufficiency and independence that Rousseau undertakes in the *Reveries* is the truly heroic model of human fulfilment for an individual existing in, but not of, society. Here we see a genius who has seen through the artifice of society and by his own volition determines that in order to achieve happiness he must live outside the norms of societal existence. He must ignore the standards by which others esteem and judge things, and his sense of self-worth must be generated internally. The quest of the *Reveries* is philosophical because it is undertaken by a man acting without outside assistance – a journey made possible through his immense perceptive skills and cognitive ability. It is the heroic act of a man who endures a great struggle and overcomes many hardships in order to overcome normal human limitations. Rousseau escapes the terrible condition of civilised men and regains his natural independence by remaining faithful and honest to himself. Through a process of self-contemplation and solitude he discovers within himself the heroic natural man. In using himself as a model in the *Reveries*, he “goes to great lengths to underscore his uniqueness and hence the improbability that anyone will follow after him.”⁶ The manner in which Rousseau presents himself is reminiscent of Plato’s Socrates. Plato holds out the possibility that others might follow the path designated by Socrates even if no one would ever ascend to quite the same heroic heights. Rousseau proposes himself as a model which other men can, or at least attempt to, emulate.

Rousseau as a coherent thinker and the importance of the individual solution

The solutions Rousseau offers to the problem of human dependence are radically different, leading to many questions about the unity and coherence of his thought. The extreme individualism of natural man in the *Discourse on Inequality* and Rousseau’s models for an individual to regain his natural independence in a denatured society are incompatible with the radical collectivism of his model of citizenship in the *Social Contract*.⁷ Rousseau is both an individualist and a partisan of the all-

⁶ Cooper, L., *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1999, p.3.

⁷ Plattner claims that both Rousseau’s individualism and collectivism are more extreme than any previous political philosopher had proposed. This is, of course, a moot point, but it does emphasize a tension within Rousseau’s position. Plattner, M., *Rousseau’s State of Nature: An Interpretation of the Discourse on Inequality*, Northern Illinois University Press, DeKalb, 1979, p.5.

consuming collectivist state. Cooper observes, “[n]ot only does he seem to contradict himself by proposing one solution in one work and another in another work, he seems to criticize in one work the solution put forth in another.”⁸

Ernest Barker, following a long established tradition, attempts to resolve the dilemma of Rousseau’s competing and contrary solutions by dismissing the importance of Rousseau’s non-political work in resolving the human dilemma. “But it [Rousseau’s thought] ends by going back to the idealisation of the Polis proclaimed in Plato’s *Republic* (that, and not ‘a return to nature’, is the real return of Rousseau), and in that act of going back to Plato it goes forward into the future and becomes the *praeparatio evangelii Hegeliani*.”⁹ For Barker, Rousseau does not consider the state of nature as a standard against which to measure human amelioration or degradation. Such a reading depends on viewing the *Social Contract* as the central work when evaluating Rousseau’s prescriptive thought. This position has long dominated Rousseauian scholarship and most monographs on Rousseau still concentrate on the *Social Contract*. This “historicist approach” argues that when man leaves nature he alienates himself from nature. History and socio-economic circumstances thereafter become more important than nature in determining what a civilised man can achieve.¹⁰ Consequently, freedom and reason rather than nature and emotions are the standards by which moral and political decisions should be taken. This reading concludes that Rousseau gently pushed aside the ideal of natural man established in the *Discourse on Inequality* in favour of the citizen of the *Social Contract* and *Political Economy*.¹¹

Strauss believes that Rousseau never resolved the fundamental contradiction between an individual and collective solution to the problem of society, but that it was the contradiction that gave substance to his thought. “The question is, then, not how

⁸ Cooper, *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, *op. cit.*, p.3 n.3.

⁹ Barker, Sir Ernest, “Introduction,” *Social Contract; Essays by Locke, Hume, Rousseau*, Oxford University Press, 1947, p.xlii. Shklar also adopts this view in Shklar, J., *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

¹⁰ This position is forcefully argued by Horowitz, A., *Rousseau, Nature and History*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987.

¹¹ Cranston, M., “Introduction,” *The Social Contract*, Penguin Books, 1968.

he solved the conflict between the individual and the society but rather how he conceived of that insoluble conflict.”¹² Whether one follows the path of collective or individual redemption, the qualities of natural man, Strauss believes, remain, for Rousseau, the standard of judgement.¹³ In his treatment of Rousseau in *Natural Right and History*, however, Strauss places a greater emphasis on Rousseau’s political solution. This emphasis on the *Social Contract* is even more pronounced in the “Three Waves of Modernity,” where Strauss adopts a Kantian interpretation of the *Social Contract*. The general will, Strauss writes, “reached full clarity in Kant’s moral doctrine,” specifically the doctrine of the categorical imperative. “Reason replaces nature” as a standard in the *Social Contract* and the desirability and goodness of the general will, Strauss argues, is not based on any consideration of man’s nature.¹⁴

Readings of Rousseau, such as Barker’s and Strauss’ in the “Three Waves of Modernity” lead to an impoverished understanding of Rousseau’s oeuvre. It imposes on Rousseau the notion that there can only be one solution to a problem. This imposition may lead to greater conceptual clarity, but it does so at the price of ignoring important elements of Rousseau’s work. Concentrating uniquely on Rousseau’s collective solution also narrows the practical relevance of Rousseau’s work. As Cooper explains in defending his emphasis on *Emile* in identifying Rousseau’s conception of the good life, to be a citizen of the type of state that Rousseau advocates in the *Social Contract* is not realistic in a modern world dominated by commercially oriented nation-states.¹⁵ Whilst most recent studies on Rousseau still emphasise the collective solution, the individual solution is now treated as a serious alternative.

¹² Strauss, L., *Natural Right and History* [1950], University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1963, p.255. Cf. Miller, J., *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1984, pp.166-7.

¹³ Strauss, *Natural Right*, *op. cit.*, pp.281-2.

¹⁴ Strauss, L., “Three Waves of Modernity,” *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. with intro. Gildin, H., Wayne State University, Detroit, 1989, pp. 81-98, p.92.

¹⁵ Cooper, L., *Rousseau, Nature, and the Problem of the Good Life*, *op. cit.*, p.6. Aspects of the Rousseauian state, if not the whole, are still relevant to contemporary debates.

Ernst Cassier and Roger Masters tried to find consistency in Rousseau's work by negating the importance of his autobiographical material and concentrating on the solutions proffered in the *Emile*, as well as Rousseau's collective solution of the newly conceived state of the *Social Contract*.¹⁶ It has been suggested that Emile is the beautiful person who will live in the beautiful city of the *Social Contract*.¹⁷ Parts of Rousseau's autobiographies, especially books ten and eleven of the *Confessions* where he displays a paranoia about conspiracies directed against him, are seen as an embarrassment that need to be covered up in order for Rousseau to be respected as a serious and important political thinker. The approach of Cassier and Masters has the advantage of enabling a treatment of Rousseauian thought without excessive attention and filtering of that thought through a study of Rousseau the man. However, it does so at the expense of ignoring a large section of his work – the first volume of the five volume Pléiade *Œuvre Complètes* is dedicated to Rousseau's autobiographical material, a section of Rousseau's work that this chapter will treat.

Only recently have scholars begun to respect Rousseau's claim that his autobiographical work is "precious to philosophers."¹⁸ The most important work in this direction is Kelly's *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy*, which has been instrumental in alerting English scholarship to the importance of Rousseau's autobiographical work to his philosophy. Kelly proposes that in the *Confessions* Rousseau uses his own life to demonstrate the crippling gap between being and appearance that men suffer in society. Kelly's reading of the *Confessions* draws upon Starobinski's claim that this gap is central to Rousseau's oeuvre.¹⁹ While informed by Kelly's analysis, this chapter will argue that Rousseau's

¹⁶ Cassier, E., *Rousseau, Kant and Goethe*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1945; Masters, R., *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1968.

¹⁷ Ellis, M., *Rousseau's Socratic Aemilian Myths; A Literary Collation of Emile and the Social Contract*, Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 1977. Ellis further argues that Emile can be seen as an analogy for the good city in the way that Plato uses the soul as an analogy for the *kallipolis*. Cf. Strong, T., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994, p.105.

¹⁸ Rousseau claims that the *Confessions* "will always be a precious book for philosophers" *Confessions*, O.C. I, 1154.

¹⁹ Kelly, C., *Rousseau's Exemplary Life: The "Confessions" as Political Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1987. Prior to Kelly, Williams also saw Rousseau's autobiography as a tool which Rousseau used to explain his theories developed elsewhere. "Rousseau's autobiography is a textual exchange with his own pre-autobiographical writings." Williams, H., *Rousseau and Romantic*

claim to have overcome the gap between appearance and being is expressed more forcefully in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* than in the *Confessions*.

Rousseau conceives of the problem of humanity in a coherent and consistent manner. Rousseau was a mature man when he published the *First Discourse*. His prognosis of the tragedy of the human condition was fully formed and complete. His identification of dependence as the great evil of the human condition would remain consistent throughout the rest of his life, as would the need for men to regain their independence. Rousseau was fully aware that the different solutions he offers to civilised men living in a corrupt society are incompatible in so far as they cannot be enacted simultaneously. He emphasises in *Emile*, “[f]orced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or making a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time” (*Emile*, I, p.39). One must either choose to escape the corroding effects of social institutions by remaining impervious to them, or all men must combat and dismantle corrupted social institutions in order to be subsumed by a new type of state. However, as both the individual and collective solutions display a unity of intention by proposing redemption to the inequality and dependence of society through a return to the wholeness of nature, most scholars now accept the systematic nature, if not presentation, of Rousseau’s thought. Rousseau himself claims to be systematic: “I have written on diverse subjects, but always from the same principles; always the same morality, the same faith, the same maxims, and, if you like, the same opinions.”²⁰ Rousseau’s self-assessment has come to be widely accepted.²¹ The image of a lone hero living by himself and for himself presented in Rousseau’s autobiographical work is thus worthy of serious consideration.

Autobiography, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.3. “The first, preauto-bibliographical stage begins when he takes a cue from God, so to speak, and wills the construction of his own world – his “autre univers”. Language is the medium of his labour, and through it Rousseau creates a self-referential and self-contained imaginative universe, something I call a world of text. Rousseau’s autobiography begins when he identifies himself within his world of text.” *Ibid.*, p.7.

²⁰ *Dialogues III, O.C.*, I, 933-5.

²¹ Cf. “The barriers to coming to grips with Rousseau today include that residual Anglo-Saxon smugness that dismissed him from the outset as “unsystematic” and therefore hopelessly unsound.” Orwin, C. & Tarcov, N., “Introduction”, *The Legacy of Rousseau, op. cit.*, pp.xi-xiv, p.xiv; “Much of the most valuable twentieth-century Rousseau scholarship has shown that, on the contrary, his thought is remarkably coherent.” Gourevitch, V., “Introduction,” *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. x. Cf. Dent, N., *Rousseau: An Introduction to his Psychological, Social and Political Theory*, Basil Blackwell, 1988.

Rousseau as the source of natural man – the state of nature revisited

Rousseau's aim in imagining the "state of nature" is to identify man's true innate characteristics once all the trappings and baggage of civilised life are removed. On what does Rousseau base his understanding of how men lived in their natural condition? Rousseau claims that he is "setting aside all the facts" (*D.I.*, 78), and his state of nature is drawn from "hypothetical and conditional reasonings" (*D.I.*, 78). Yet simultaneously and contradictorily, he leans on empirical and scientific knowledge in order to give his state of nature depth and substance. A long line of scholars has reasoned that the only facts he is actually setting aside are the biblical facts of *Genesis*. Rousseau, the argument goes, presents his state of nature as hypothetical uniquely to pre-empt persecution from ecclesiastical authorities.²² Under the thin disguise of hypothesising, the Rousseauian state of nature is presented as historical fact.

Such a reading is difficult to maintain when one considers that Rousseau systematically dismisses all the potential sources that could be used in determining a "state of nature." He distances himself from the tradition of philosophy, dismissing his philosophical predecessors as "liars" (*D.I.*, 79). Rousseau accuses Hobbes of transposing the qualities of civilised men to natural men (*D.I.*, 78). Rousseau makes extensive use of contemporary ethnological surveys, but the "savage" exists in a communal state and hence is already socialised, even if not yet entirely corrupted.²³ Rousseau claims to listen to the "voice of nature" (*D.I.*, 70), but his attempts to draw analogies with nature to describe natural man lack rigour and are generally misinformed even when judged against the science of his time. It is, of course, easy

²² Plattner, gives a good historical overview of this issue in Rousseauian studies before concluding that Rousseau's state of nature should be interpreted as factual. Plattner, *Rousseau's State of Nature*, *op. cit.*, pp.17-30; Cf. Meier, H., "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men: On the Intention of Rousseau's most Philosophical Work," *Interpretation*, 16(2), Winter 1988-9, pp. 211-227, p.221. For a counter view see Gourevitch, V., "Rousseau's Pure State of Nature", *Interpretation*, 16(1), 1988, pp.23-60.

²³ For an account of the sources Rousseau utilised to build his state of nature see: Cobban, A., *Rousseau and the Modern State*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1964, pp.142-54; Symcox, G., "The Wild Man's Return: The Enclosed Vision of Rousseau's *Discourses*," *The Wild Man Within: An Image in Western Thought from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, [Eds. Dudley, E., & Novak, M.] University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1972, pp.223-47.

to show the failings of Rousseau's state of nature using current knowledge.²⁴ However, some of his mistakes are far less subtle, such as his incorrect identification of the number of teats on a cow. Rousseau counts teats to determine how many offspring nature intends herbivorous and carnivorous animals to have, but a cow has four teats and not two as Rousseau asserts (*D.I.*, n. H, 146; *O.C.*, III, 201). The miscounting of cow teats is not crucial in itself, but it indicates that Rousseau's view of nature is uninformed and lazy. Rousseau's *soi-disant* empirical observations are merely coincidental asides and their exactitude, or lack thereof, is not crucial because Rousseau's state of nature is best understood as an abstract concept, rather than a concrete historical reality. Rousseau's thought is expressed poetically. Logical progression and internal consistency take second place to the power of touching the reader's instincts and emotions with poetry.²⁵ Rousseau speaks from his own heart to the hearts of others.²⁶ The source Rousseau draws upon to inform his portrait of natural man is primarily a self-examination. The state of nature is the story of Rousseau the man applied to all other men.

An examination of the defining human characteristic, *perfectibilité*, demonstrates how the evolution of humanity is conceived as if it happened to a single man. Man differs from beasts "in his capacity as a free agent" (*D.I.*, 87). Unlike the beasts, natural man does not follow instinct when it is not advantageous to do so: he has the ability to adapt. Free will endows natural man with the faculty of *perfectibilité* – self-improvement. *Perfectibilité* is the defining human characteristic that led man from a solitary life in the forest that could have lasted eternally to a communal existence (*D.I.*, 106). Man realises that he can improve his life by

²⁴ Masters, in particular, has savagely applied current scientific knowledge to demonstrate the shortcomings in Rousseau state of nature. "[Rousseau's] explanation of amour propre has been demolished by primatological observation, neuroscientific research, and psychological experimentation." Masters, R., "Rousseau and the Rediscovery of Human Nature" *The Legacy of Rousseau, op. cit.*, pp. 110-140, p.122.

²⁵ Rousseau is conscious of his poetic approach and writes in the preface to *Emile*, in stark contradiction to the above quote from the *Dialogues*: "This [is a] collection of reflections and observations, disordered and almost incoherent ... For a long time I hesitated to publish it; and often, in working at it; it has made me aware that it is not sufficient to have written a few pamphlets to know how to compose a book" (*Emile*, p.33).

²⁶ Cf. "O man, ... here is your history as I believe I have read it, not in the books of your fellow men who are liars but in Nature which never lies" (*D.I.*, 79). It is this emotive and passionate methodology that has seen Rousseau placed at the heart of Romanticism.

controlling nature: he can use tools, make better shelter, manage the produce of the earth and coordinate his efforts with other men. All other human characteristics can be traced to man's *perfectibilité*.²⁷

Perfectibilité is a problematic notion in Rousseau's proposed evolution of the history of humanity from the cold, harsh and lonely world of original man to the primitive communities that represent the golden age of humanity, "the happiest epoch and the most lasting" (*D.I.*, 115). A standard of comparison is essential for *perfectibilité* because for an improvement in life to be understood as an improvement and to be persisted with thereafter it must be measured against something or someone, either another person or a personal past experience. Natural man, on Rousseau's description could not have the faculty of *perfectibilité* because he is neither capable of a social comparison, nor a comparison based on past experience. The solitary creature that is Rousseau's natural man can barely recognise another human being as a distinct individual (*D.I.*, 104), so it would seem impossible for him to compare his standard of life to another and see it as better or worse. If man is truly solitary, as Rousseau argues in the first part of the *Discourse*, there is no reason why such creatures would regard each other as equals and imagine that life could be made easier by combining forces (*D.I.*, 109-112). If natural men had latent *perfectibilité* based on social potential, they would escape this primitive condition within a generation and Rousseau's central claim that man was once good but is corrupted by dependence would collapse. Hypothesising man's natural solitude is essential for Rousseau because it enables him to argue that the presence of others is not necessary for humans.²⁸ This theme is central to his self-realisation in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, which proposes that a life lived materialistically and psychologically independent of all others is the supreme life. It would appear that *perfectibilité* cannot be based, in Rousseau's scheme, on a social comparison.

If the comparison upon which *perfectibilité* is founded is personal past experience, natural man must have a sense of the past and the present and consequently the future, qualities that Rousseau explicitly denies that natural man

²⁷ Meier, "On the Intention of Rousseau's most Philosophical Work", *op. cit.*, p.217.

²⁸ Strong, T., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994, p.49.

possesses. Because he has the ability to adapt to his environment in a manner that animals do not, a natural man may instinctively pick up a stick to fight off a carrion bird that is threatening the produce of his hunt. If the tactic worked and the bird made a retreat so that the man could eat his dinner in peace where he had in the past retreated, the man could gauge an improvement in his life. If the next day the man forgot the success of the stick, he would never leave his primitive state. If, on the other hand, he remembered the defensive trick he would be sure to have a stick handy when eating his dinner. This would indicate an appreciation of the future and the past, a quality whose absence is essential to Rousseau's description of natural man in the first part of the *Discourse* because it enables the love of living in the present moment. Appreciating existence in the present is also, as will be seen below, central to the *Reveries*. If natural man did have a latent *perfectibilité*, it would not require a series of freak events "without which man would have remained forever in his primitive condition" (*D.I.*, 106). If he were capable of reasoning that he could improve his life by working together with his fellows, there is no reason why he would have waited thousands of years to do so. Moreover, if man did not have latent *perfectibilité* he would be still living in the forest with the monkeys and the bears. Natural man, as he is described by Rousseau, could not possess the faculty of *perfectibilité* whilst being simultaneously both solitary and without a sense of the future or the past. Rousseau's description of natural man at this point does not withstand critical analysis.

Rousseau runs into the same unresolvable problem when explaining how a solitary creature acquires speech. Rousseau rejects Aristotle's claim that speech is natural to man because this would also imply his natural sociability. The argument that God endowed man with speech equally implies he was naturally sociable. God, in all his wisdom, would surely recognise the futility of imbuing a solitary creature with the ability to communicate to his fellows.²⁹ Rousseau searches in vain for an explanation of how speech, or indeed even the need for speech, develops in a solitary creature. Plattner resolves the problem of speech and *perfectibilité* for Rousseau by claiming that he had an evolutionist view of human development, reasoning that no other explanation is possible and fits with Rousseau's view of natural man as purely

²⁹ Plattner, *Rousseau's State of Nature*, *op. cit.*, p.34

physical.³⁰ He takes Rousseau at his word when he says that it is a series of accidents that elevates man from his natural state.³¹ Plattner gives a convincing demonstration that natural man is bestial. However, some reason needs to be given for man's progression from the primitive state, and the textual evidence provided to support an evolutionary reading of the *Second Discourse* is slim.

The progression from primitive beast to communal and rational being in the *Second Discourse* simply does not work. The defining human characteristic for Rousseau is independence. Rousseau manipulates a "state of nature" that confirms that independence is the supreme human value rather than imagining a state of nature and drawing man's innate characteristic from that state of nature. The source for the state of nature is Rousseau's own life. He was once happy and free but became entangled in the posturing and attention seeking of civilised man and fell into the depths of despair. He could only regain happiness by rediscovering his independence. Rousseau would state categorically in his autobiographical work that he looked into his heart and found natural man. "In a word, it needed a man to paint himself to show us primitive man."³² This man was Rousseau himself. "He discovered within himself the proximity of original transparency."³³ As a young scholar, he applied his personal experience to all men and attempted to find a solution for humanity at large. In his later years, having lost his faith in humanity, and, in turn, having been rejected and ridiculed by his human brothers, he concentrated on getting the best out of life for himself.

Rousseau himself strove to achieve his prescribed heroic standard by reconnecting with his natural self. It is, therefore, necessary to explicate Rousseau's understanding of natural goodness before embarking upon a discussion of Rousseau's realisation of this ideal.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.130.

³² *Dialogues*, III, *O.C.*, I, 936.

³³ "Il découvre en lui-même la proximité de la transparence originelle." Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit.*, pp.30-31.

Natural man's unitary psychology and consequent inner harmony allow him to experience sublimely what would appear to be a very dull life. Natural man's total surrender to himself leads to a pure and unqualified joy of existence and an abandonment to the present:

The prospect of the natural world leaves him indifferent because it has become familiar. It is always the same pattern, always the same rotation. ... His soul, which nothing disturbs, dwells only in the sensation of its present existence, without any idea of the future, however close that might be, and his projects, limited as his horizons, hardly extend to the end of the day (*D.I.*, 90).

The Epicurean-like pleasure that natural man experiences by simply living constitutes the good life. Liberated from inner conflict, anxiety about the future, and finding survival a simple task, natural man has a considerable time. Yet, as he has no desires that are superfluous to survival, natural man essentially does nothing with his time.

His imagination paints no pictures; his heart yearns for nothing; his modest needs are readily supplied at hand; and he is so far from having enough knowledge for him to desire to acquire more knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity (*D.I.*, 90).

Natural men lead lonely, solitary lives. They create no industry and no arts. Natural man lives like a cat who enjoys the idle leisure of stretching out in the sunshine. The cat, the animal that most preciously guards its independence, appears on the original frontispiece of both the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of the Inequalities Amongst Men* and the *Social Contract*. That Rousseau would consider this a good life anticipates what he hopes to achieve with his independence in his last days. The grand ambitions of the *Social Contract* and its miraculous transformative power upon the men who partake in it seems an interlude sandwiched between the cat-like idleness and insouciant independence of both natural man and the god-like philosopher of Rousseau's autobiographical writings.

It is the "simple feeling of existence ... with a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul" that Rousseau captures in his last days and recounts in the *Reveries* (*R.S.W.*, 5. 88). The philosopher, like

natural man, is devoted to his body and “nothing related to the body could ever truly occupy his soul; he finds himself in the joys and raptures of pure and disinterested contemplation – for example, the study of plants in the spirit of Theophrastus – perfect happiness and a godlike self-sufficiency.”³⁴ Theophrastus was, according to Rousseau (*R.S.W.*, 7, 109), the only botanist of antiquity who simply catalogued plants rather than seeking a medicinal purpose in them.

Rousseau’s life as a path to heroism

Civilised man loses his psychic harmony and becomes self-conflicted. He is a bourgeois.³⁵ “He will be nothing” (*Emile*, Bk I, 40.). After describing the bourgeois as “nothing” in *Emile*, Rousseau defines the man of substance:

To be something, to be oneself, a man must act as he speaks; he must always be decisive in making his choice, make it in a lofty style, and always stick to it (le prendre hautement et le suivre toujours) (O.C., IV, 250; *Emile*, I, p.40).

The integration of speech and action was previously identified as a hallmark of the Homeric hero. Achilles is the pre-eminent hero of the *Iliad* precisely because he follows his verbal threats with concordant action. Achilles has the rare ability to do exactly what he said he was going to do – he “acts as he speaks”. Starobinski contends that the gap between speech and action, and the concomitant gap between being and appearance, that Rousseau observed among his contemporaries would be the central theme of his oeuvre from the *First Discourse* to the very end of his life. Rousseau believes that human fulfilment and happiness can only be secured when this gap is bridged by replicating the unitary nature of natural man. This would negate the need to pretend to feel, think and be other than what one genuinely was. Rousseau writes in a letter:

³⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right, op. cit.*, p.261.

³⁵ “Rousseau is the first writer to use the term *bourgeois* in the modern sense popularized by Marx. It is defined in opposition to *citizen*, and the understanding connected with the term is central to all later political thought. However, Rousseau does frequently use it in its more ordinary meaning of *middle class* as opposed to *peasant, poor, or noble*. Of course the two senses are closely related.” Bloom, *Emile*, n.6, p.482.

As soon as I was in a condition to observe men, I watched them act and I listened to them speak; and, seeing that their action did not match their speech, I searched for the reason behind this dissemblance and I found that to be and to appear were for them two things as different as talking and acting, and this second difference was the cause of the other and had itself a cause that I must seek still. ... I examined the consequences of this contradiction, and I saw that it explained all of the vices of men and all the evils of society.³⁶

Man in the state of nature was not fractured. He was a man without a mirror.³⁷ Entirely independent, natural man had no reason to consider what others thought of him, nor did he pass judgement on others. Man in nature was the antithesis of the bourgeois because he was himself, he was something and he was real. However, the state of nature was limited in its prescriptive capabilities because it was impossibly far away and out of reach. Rousseau would come to find man's natural qualities within himself. Rousseau's life would be the "exemplary human life"³⁸ that could explain human corruption and demonstrate man's possible redemption. Rousseau believed that his sensitivity, artistic genius and diverse life experience as a rural lad, diplomat's assistant and Parisian celebrity, placed him in the unique position to serve as a microcosm of humanity's problems.

Rousseau had some justification when he boasted of his uniqueness "I am unlike any of those I have seen" (*Confessions O.C.*, I, p.5).³⁹ Rousseau was unique as a list of his achievements reveals. His operas had been played to the King who offered him a royal pension, his novels and essays were best-sellers, *Emile* had launched a trend for *Bildungsromans*, his politics would ignite a revolution, his desire to find truth in nature and the senses would launch a European wide movement

³⁶ Lettre à Christophe de Beaumont, *O.C.*, IV, 966-67. First part cited in Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, op. cit.*, p.16. Also cited in Kelly, p.184.

³⁷ "Nous ne voyons ni l'âme d'autrui, parce qu'elle se cache, ni la nôtre, parce que nous n'avons point de miroir intellectuel." *Lettres morales, O.C.* IV, 1092.

³⁸ Kelly, *The Confessions, op. cit.*, p.xi.

³⁹ This claim to uniqueness is also made in Rousseau's most conservative and restrained work the *Government of Poland*. "Perhaps this is just so many chimeras, but these are my ideas; it is not my fault that they are so little like other men's, and it has not been up to me to organize my head in some other way" (*C.G.P.*, p.259).

(Romanticism), and finally his titillating self-exposés would almost single-handedly invent a new and lasting genre: the reveal-all autobiography.⁴⁰

Rousseau projected an image of himself as a man who had answered to the challenge he presents in the quotation from *Emile*: “a man must act as he speaks; he must always be decisive in making his choice, make it in a lofty style, and always stick to it” (*Emile*, I, p.40). Rousseau certainly declared his opinions in a “lofty style.” The choices of his personal life did not always match his rhetoric, but in his imagination Rousseau conceived of himself as an heroic, decisive and lofty character. The image that Rousseau projected of himself has been taken up and resulted in the image of Rousseau as a mad-cap philosopher who is overrun by emotion, prone to hyperbole, always writing in a great haste, and favouring (a lofty) style over content.⁴¹ Typical of his emotive writing style is a letter explaining the sudden inspiration that struck him on first seeing the advertisement from the Dijon academy offering an essay prize on the question: “Has the revival of the arts and the sciences done more to corrupt or purify morals?”

Of a sudden I felt my spirit dazzled by a thousand lights; ... I let myself drop under one of the trees, and there I spent half an hour in such excitement that as I rose I noticed that my jacket was wet with my own tears ... All I have been able to retain of those swarms of great truths that enlightened me under that tree has been scattered quite feebly in my main works.⁴²

Cranston presents quite a different image of Rousseau’s writing routine during his years in the valley of Montmorency (c.1756-1762), when this letter was composed.

⁴⁰ The *Confessions* was not the first autobiography, but it was the first “reveal-all” type that concentrated on the details of the author’s private life. The word autobiography only entered European languages at the turn of the century to deal with the “onslaught of works inspired by the *Confessions*” Kelly, *The Confessions*, *op. cit.*, p.xi. p.3, Cf. Roddier, H., “Introduction”, *Les Reveries*, Classiques Garnier, Paris, 1960, pp.v-xcvii, pp. xxxiv-v

⁴¹ Roddier concludes that Rousseau was insane, “Introduction”, *op. cit.*, pp, xxi-xxxix; Shklar considers him “half-mad.” Shklar, *Men and Citizens*, *op. cit.*, p.220.

⁴² Rousseau, J-J., Seconde lettre à Malesherbes, Montmorency, 12 janvier 1762, *O.C.*, I, 1135 cited in Cassirer, E., *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, trans and ed. Gray, P., Columbia University Press, New York, 1954, p.47.

“He quickly developed a daily routine, almost as regular as that of Immanuel Kant.”⁴³ The gap between being and appearance reveals itself in the difference between Rousseau’s strict writing schedule and the appearance he presents in the letter to Malesherbes describing himself being overcome with sudden enlightenment.

The animated style of the letter quoted above is not confined to Rousseau’s personal correspondence. The outrageous opening lines to the *Confessions* are equally close to hyperbole and augments overstatement with pomposity.

I have undertaken to establish a project which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. I want to show to my fellows a man under the true light of nature; and this man will be myself. ... I am not made like anyone I have ever seen; I will venture to say that I am unlike anyone in the world. If I am worth no more than others, at least I am different. Whether nature did well or ill in breaking the mould in which she formed me, is a question which can only be answered after having read my book (*Confessions, O.C., I, 5*).

These opening lines of the *Confessions* are not unique in style to the rest of the work. A reader can dip into any of the 656 pages of the *Confessions* in Pléiade edition of the *Œuvres Complètes* and find this exuberant arrogance. One translator of the *Confessions* has made a deliberate effort to moderate the tone of the work. Cohen states in his introduction: “His [Rousseau] rhetorical tricks are very much of his age, and it has been possible to tone them down slightly in this translation.”⁴⁴ Whilst it is true that Rousseau’s tendency to hyperbole is not unusual in eighteenth-century French novels and correspondence, Rousseau’s use of such devices is excessive even by the standards of the age.

Whilst Rousseau’s “lofty style” (*Emile*, 40) may be not be exceptional for an autobiography, when he uses the same style in a political treatise he must accept some responsibility for promoting the notion that his oeuvre abounds in paradoxes and is disjunctured. He famously starts his *Social Contract* [1762]:

⁴³ Cranston, M., *The Noble Savage: Jean Jacques Rousseau, 1754-1762*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, pp.24-25.

⁴⁴ Cohen, J., “Introduction”, *The Confessions*, Penguin Classics, 1953, p.12. In fairness to Cohen, capturing Rousseau’s style, especially in the *Confessions*, in translation is near impossible.

Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains. Those who think themselves the masters of others are indeed greater slaves than they. How did this transformation come about? *I do not know* [Je l'ignore] (*S.C.*, I, 1, 49).

Rousseau published the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* seven years before the *Social Contract*, but now claims ignorance on the causes of inequality amongst men.⁴⁵ Such a lofty and exuberant style is certainly not typical of political essays of the period. Montesquieu feels no need to present himself as a lone hero combating history and society. Montesquieu modestly concludes his preface to the *Spirit of the Laws*: “still I do not believe that I totally lacked genius. When I have seen what so many great men in France, England and Germany have written before me, I have been filled with wonder, but I have not lost courage. ‘And I too am a painter,’ have I said with Correggio.”⁴⁶ Montesquieu humbly accepts a place in a tradition of thinkers, whereas Rousseau departs like a lone explorer discovering a virgin territory.

To explain how Rousseau came to see the story of humanity’s degradation on a personal level, Starobinski quotes at length a passage from the *Confessions* in which the boy Jean-Jacques is accused of breaking a comb.⁴⁷ Rousseau is innocent of the crime but all the indications point to his guilt. The gap between his actual innocence and the appearance of his guilt serves as the perfect exemplar of the breach between being (*être*) and appearance (*paraître*) that Rousseau observes in contemporary society. This story from his childhood can serve as an analogy as well as an example for Rousseau’s diagnostic and prescriptive thought and how he came to see himself as model of individual redemption and heroic overcoming that civilised man could undertake. A child, for Rousseau, displays the same integrity of desire and action as did natural man. On Rousseau’s theory of natural goodness, it must be assumed that

⁴⁵ It has been established by historians that Rousseau was very particular about the editing and printing process of his work. Cf. Leigh, R., *Unsolved Problems in the Bibliography of J-J. Rousseau*, [The Sandars Lecture in Bibliography] Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁴⁶ Montesquieu, C., [1748] *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. Cohler, A, Miller, B. & Stone, H., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.xlv.

⁴⁷ *Confessions*, O.C., I, 18-20, cited in Starobinski 18-19.

every child is born in a ‘natural’ state and only adopts the vices of civilised man as he is exposed to society. Yet an adult cannot simply become a child once again just as civilised man cannot become once again a natural man.

The analogy also illuminates a serious criticism that may be directed at Rousseau, one which Starobinski chooses not to point out. Rousseau’s view of children is based on speculation and conjecture as much as his theory of human goodness in the state of nature. Anyone who has dealt with children will be aware that whilst they can be honest and transparent they can also be duplicitous, manipulative, sneaky and must be taught not to lie and cheat in games. A child of eight, as one can estimate Rousseau was when the comb incident occurred, is not necessarily transparent. Rousseau’s inexperience of children becomes obvious in the ninth walk of the *Reveries*. The reader is invited to contemplate fables as Rousseau recounts his exchanges with and observations of children.⁴⁸ Limited contact with children would have been the norm for any eighteenth-century man, but more pronounced for a man who abandoned his five children to the dubious fate of an eighteenth-century orphanage. If Jean-Jacques, the man, had used his children rather than his limited recollection of his own childhood as the basis for his observations on youthful innocence, he would have had a more complete and reliable understanding of children and humanity as interdependent.

Kelly, following Starobinski’s model, uses Rousseau’s account of his experience in Venice with deformed choir girls, a prostitute and finally the courtesan Zuletta to show how a young Rousseau would start to ponder the issues that a mature Rousseau would elaborate in the first two discourses. Zuletta appears to Rousseau as a divinity, yet her social status demands that she be considered a monster.⁴⁹ Rousseau at twenty-eight explains the contradiction between her charm and her social position by attributing it to Zuletta’s supposedly deformed nipple. A mature Rousseau believes the episode demonstrates how civilised humans are prisoners to their imaginations that are guided by social prejudice. The contradiction between Zuletta’s social position and her charm is explained by the gap between being and

⁴⁸ My personal reaction was shared by Roddier, “Introduction”, *op. cit.*, p.lxxvi.

⁴⁹ *Confessions*, OC, I, pp. 320-3; Kelly, *The Confessions*, *op. cit.*, pp.174-183.

appearance that exists in society. Zuietta is not a monster, it is the prejudice of society that has attributed the appearance of monstrosity upon her, which does not correspond to her natural charm.

Having identified the disjuncture between civilised man on the one hand and man's natural essence personified by his own life on the other, Rousseau sets about demonstrating how others can follow his example to overcome this disjuncture. His late autobiographical writings show how a particularly talented individual might regain natural self-dependence and wholeness even amidst a fractured society. Rousseau sheds all of civilised man's social artifice and regains his natural core by becoming a solitary, independent man who remains impervious to the judgement of others. A simple return to nature is not possible in the context of Rousseau's system. He abandons human society by losing himself in contemplation of the sublime beauty of nature. He becomes focussed uniquely on himself by clearing his mind with non-teleological intellectual exercises, such as botany. This enables him to lose himself in philosophical contemplation of the self.

Rousseau's project shares with Plato the ideal that philosophic contemplation is the means to psychic harmony. The *telos* of Rousseau's contemplative philosophising, as opposed to Plato, is contained within the self. A man must strip down to heroism by reducing himself to his most basic state, rather than build up to it as Homer and Plato had presumed by striving to escape the human condition. Digging down to one's innate essence is not easier than climbing away from it. The *telos* of Rousseau's philosophic journey is a man who acts instinctively and achieves psychic harmony by coordinating his desires and actions like a Homeric hero.

Although Kelly's discussion of Rousseau's quest concentrates on the *Confessions*, the model of a self-sufficient philosopher is even more starkly expressed in the *Reveries*. The abandonment to solitary reverie by immersion in nature can be detected in the *Confessions*, but there it is still restrained by a desire to partake in human company. In the *Confessions* Rousseau concludes a passage on the beauty of nature: "I walked around in a kind of ecstasy, abandoning all my senses and my heart

to the enjoyment of it all, yet sighing a little that I was alone in enjoying it.”⁵⁰ The abandonment to solitary reverie is not complete as he misses human company. Rousseau still desires to be respected and celebrated by his fellows. While the *Confessions* in part a response to his many numerous critics and especially his *ad hominem* critics, such as Voltaire, in the *Reveries*, Rousseau claims he has no more confessions to make, no more public justifications to pronounce. He no longer seeks to unsully his name for future generations, nor does he seek to persuade anyone of his goodness (*R.S.W.*, 1, 33). The *Reveries* purports to demonstrate that Rousseau no longer needed anything or anyone.

The Solitary Walker: a new hero

In the *Reveries*, Rousseau’s last book, he attempts to explain how he overcame the pain that his banishment from society had caused him.

Here I am, then, alone on the earth; having now no brother, no neighbour, no friend or society but myself. The most sociable and loving of human beings has been rejected by unanimous accord (*Reveries*, I, *O.C.*, I, 995).

After suffering years of anguish, Rousseau resigns himself to his fate as a solitary walker and comes to celebrate the “complete calm and absolute tranquillity” (*R.S.W.*, 1, 31) that embracing isolation and solitude bring him in his last days. “I am a hundred times happier in my solitude than I could be if I lived amongst them (people)” (1,30).

In his isolation Rousseau becomes what nature had intended him to be (*R.S.W.*, 2, 35). He exists as natural man did because he overcomes his *amour propre*: his vanity. It is no longer necessary for him “to seem to be other than he was in reality” (*D.I.*, 119) because his ego is no longer dependent on the opinion of others.

Where previously I strove to cling on to a host of things [namely the good opinion of the public], now, when I have lost hold of them all one after another and have nothing left but myself, I have at least regained

⁵⁰ Cited in France, P., “Introduction” *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Penguin Books, 1979, pp. 7-23, p.16.

a firm footing. Under pressure from all sides, I remain upright because I cling to nothing and lean only on myself (*R.S.W.*, 8, 126).

Rousseau rediscovers the solitary core of man's natural essence and sheds the façade of sociability. This is only possible when one can overcome and eliminate *amour propre*. Societal pride (*amour propre*) "becoming once again the proper love of self (*amour de moi même*), it returned to the true natural order and freed me from the tyranny of public opinion" (8, 129).

Regaining his natural independence and self-sufficiency, Rousseau also regained the natural man's joy of existence. Natural man's joy is premised on the fact that he is dependent on the only constant in life: the self. Other than the self, Rousseau observes in the fifth walk "[e]verything is in constant flux on this earth" (*R.S.W.*, 5, 88). Almost the exact same sentence is repeated at the beginning of the ninth walk (p.137), and the eighth walk begins with Rousseau reflecting on how all the moments of happiness in his life have been fleeting (p.123). This theme is strongly articulated throughout the *Reveries* and one might suspect that Rousseau had been reflecting on the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus (c. 576-480 BC), whose two famous maxims "everything flows" and "you cannot step in the same river twice" because by the time you step in a second time, the waters have changed. Plato quoted (*Cratylus*, 402a). Man, for Rousseau, could not possibly be happy in an unstable and changing environment. In society, Rousseau explains in the fifth walk:

Nothing keeps the same unchanging shape, and our affections, being attached to things outside of us, necessarily change and pass away as they do. Always out ahead of us or lagging behind, they recall a past which is gone or anticipate a future which may never come into being; there is nothing solid there for the heart to attach itself to. Thus our earthly joys are almost without exceptions the creatures of a moment: I doubt whether any of us knows the meaning of lasting happiness. ... And how can we give the name of happiness to a fleeting state which leaves our hearts still empty and anxious, either regretting something that is past or desiring something that is yet to come? (*R.S.W.*, 5, 88).

Fearing the future and regretting the past, civilised man cannot find psychic tranquillity. He is always at war with himself, at war with circumstances beyond his control and at war with others. Rousseau wishes to escape the turmoil of society and

he yearns for a state of stability. The tranquillity of living without a sense of the past or the future evokes the simple and unconcerned existence of natural man who existed uniquely in the present.

But if there is a state where the soul can find a resting-place secure enough to establish itself and concentrate its entire being there, with no need to remember the past or reach into the future, where time is nothing to it, where the present runs on indefinitely but this duration goes unnoticed, with no sign of the passing of time, and no other feeling of deprivation or enjoyment, pleasure or pain, desire or fear than the simple feeling of existence, a feeling that fills our soul entirely, as long as this state lasts, we can call ourselves happy, not with a poor, incomplete and relative happiness such as we find in the pleasures of life, but with a sufficient, complete and perfect happiness which leaves no emptiness to be filled in the soul (*loc. cit.*).

I quote this passage at such length because it is a fine illustration of the poetic power of persuasion Rousseau is capable of producing. The reader is seduced by the promise of tranquillity and ease that is only possible with independence.

Whereas Plato responds to Heraclitus' thesis of continual flux with a doctrine of intellectual ascension to a stable realm of higher reality – the world of the Forms – Rousseau sees the self as the only point of stability in a complex and changing world. One can only be happy when one has no dependence other than on the self. One can only be dependent on the self when one overcomes the defining social characteristic: *amour propre*. Being ignorant of everything other than his own desires, natural man exists unconsciously in such a state. Civilised man, however, must ascend to the self in order to achieve psychic harmony. Whereas Plato praised the teleological end of philosophy, the recognition of the Forms of eternal reality, Rousseau seeks an end for philosophy that is centred on the self. One must escape the fluctuating earthly existence of men and find refuge in one's own soul. The isolation and solitude that Rousseau seeks also evokes the isolation and total independence of natural man. It was shown above that natural man could not have possessed *perfectibilité* if he was truly isolated and lived entirely in the present. A successful embrace of the qualities Rousseau is aiming to master would render him incapable of self-improvement. An inability to exercise self-improvement appears decidedly unheroic.

Rousseau's method of achieving psychic harmony through the renunciation of the earthly world and the language of the *Reveries* echoes that of Plato's *Phaedo*. "The heart must be at peace and its calm untroubled by any passion," (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89) and the man at peace with himself must guard against "sensual and earthly distractions." And Rousseau continues:

Set free from all the earthly passions that are born of the tumult of social life, my soul would often soar out of this atmosphere and would converse before its time with the celestial spirits whose number it hopes soon to swell (*R.S.W.*, 5, 91).

The desire of soaring beyond the world of humanity is central to the *Phaedo* and the anticipation of meeting the already dead is expressed at the end of the *Apology*. The soul, Socrates would say, must be well balanced and avoid the passions of the body. The escape from the earthly world, for Plato, is dependent on escaping the soul's prison on earth: the body, and more specifically the body's passions. The source of fluctuations and uncontrollable passions for Rousseau is not the body, but social interaction. In order to achieve psychic harmony, for Rousseau, the soul and the body must be re-united as one, as they were in their natural state. This combined unity, the self, is central to natural man's happiness and is, for Rousseau, central to the happiness of the self-sufficient philosopher.

The first step in achieving dependence on the self is physical and psychological isolation from others. For Rousseau, this is a condition that has been imposed on him. After the publication of *Emile* and the *Social Contract* in 1762, the persecution Rousseau suffered at the hands of ecclesiastic and state authorities was very real.⁵¹ The persecution was augmented in Rousseau's mind by the perception of various conspiracies that he perceived were out to get him. It was only when he came to embrace the renunciation from the world of other men that he became at ease, or so he claims. This dependence on the self can be reinforced by removing oneself from the world of men by losing oneself in the beauty of nature.

⁵¹ Barguillet, F., *Rousseau ou L'illusion Passionnée*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1991, pp. 19-22. For the devastating effect this had on Rousseau see pp.76-97.

A common theme of the *Reveries*, one that is dealt with most explicitly in the seventh walk, is the beauty of nature. He describes the barren earth,

brought to life by nature and dressed in her wedding dress amidst the running water and songs of birds, earth in harmony of her three kingdoms offers man a living, fascinating and enchanting spectacle, the only one of which his eyes and his heart can never grow weary (*R.S.W.*, 7, 108.).

The harmony of nature can be reproduced in the soul of the observer. A sensitive observer, one like Rousseau, will find himself “in a state of blissful self-abandonment [and] he loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful order, with which he feels himself at one” (7, 108). However, for Rousseau, simply bathing in the beauty of nature or taking promenades in the countryside does not appear to be sufficient. “His ideas have to be restricted and his imagination limited by some particular circumstances” (7, 108). The particular set of circumstances that limits Rousseau’s imagination are the ordered approach he takes to observing nature. Rousseau takes up botany.

An important feature of botanising is that it frees Rousseau from all social interaction. He does not need to buy equipment, nor does he need anybody to help him. Botany is an entirely self-sufficient activity that can be conducted in solitude. The botanising, however, must not be constrained by necessity or some practical advantage. Botany, for Rousseau, is the observation of the artistry of nature, not the potential use of plants in the “the apothecary’s medicine chest.”⁵² Rousseau does not want “the colour of the meadows, the brilliance of the flowers ... soured by the idea of human ailments ... fevers, stones, gout and epilepsy” (*R.S.W.*, 7, 110-111). His aim is to observe, compare and classify because he believes that losing oneself in the contemplation of nature quietens the imagination, especially the fear of the future (*R.S.W.*, 7, 107-8). However, Rousseau cannot simply walk around and observe. In the event he needs to put the plants into groups, “finally studying the organisation of plants so to be able to follow the intricate working of these mechanisms, to succeed

⁵² Williams, *Rousseau: Les Reveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 29. Rousseau’s view is at odds with the Enlightenment’s thirst for explanatory knowledge.

occasionally in discovering their general laws and reason the purpose of their varied structures” (*R.S.W.*, 7, 115). Rousseau’s intellectual investment in botany – attempting to discover general laws through logical deduction and inspection – is aimed at “refraining from thinking” (*R.S.W.*, 7, 112). Contemplating nature is the easiest path to existence through the senses, but Rousseau can only do this through a process of intellectual rigour. It requires a highly conscious effort for Rousseau to liberate his mind. Rousseau “mobilised all his faculties” in order to dream.⁵³

Rousseau proposes the extraordinary project of using philosophy to establish emotive and instinctive visceral control over the mind. Plato and many subsequent schools of thought considered the purpose of philosophy to be arriving at rational control over visceral desires. Rousseau proposes using philosophy for the opposite result, thus reverting to a man whose “desires do not go beyond his physical needs” (*D.I.*, 89). The creation of an unreflective being, as natural man was, becomes a structured and reasoned exercise for Rousseau. Herein lies the fundamental, and in many respects insolvable, dilemma that exists within the *Reveries*: he must use his intellect to become unperturbed by thought. An understanding of this process is perhaps best attempted by identifying the manner in which Rousseau uses the word *rêverie*.

Locke had observed: “[w]hen ideas float about in our mind without any reflection or regard for the understanding, it is that which the French call *resvery*; our language has scarce a name for it” (*Essay*, II, 19).⁵⁴ Consequently, English has adopted the French word. However, for Rousseau, the French word *rêverie* had two related but distinct meanings. The first is in the sense identified by Locke as a state of thinking that is without reflection and meanders without a *telos*. The “promeneur solitaire” of the title reinforces this sense of reverie. A promenade is a walk whose destination is directed by chance, it is a stroll. The title of the book is sometimes and more accurately, if somewhat less poetically pleasingly, translated as *The Reveries of*

⁵³ Roddier, “Introduction”, *op. cit.*, p.xxvi.

⁵⁴ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk.II, Ch.19, cited in Williams, H., *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.9.

the Solitary Stroller.⁵⁵ Secondly, as Raymond observes in his introduction to the *Reveries* in the *Oeuvres Complètes*, *rêverie*, at the time Rousseau was writing, was also used to mean a “natural mode of abandoned thinking”⁵⁶ arrived at through profound meditation. Meditation is structured thought that follows a set of rules and often has a religious *telos* and is not equivalent to thought that meanders aimlessly.⁵⁷ This distinction is confirmed by *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française*, which cites Montaigne’s *Essai* I, 26 to demonstrate both uses of the word *rêverie*. Montaigne uses *rêverie* to mean “*activité de l’esprit qui médite, qui réfléchit* [the activity of a mind that meditates and reflects],” and later “*je vois (...) que ce ne sont ici que des rêveries d’homme qui n’a goûté des sciences que la croûte première* [I understand that what we have here are nothing but the reveries of a man who has only tasted the first crumb of scientific knowledge].”⁵⁸ A final example should suffice to demonstrate the ambiguity of *rêverie* as both aimless and abandoned daydreaming and serious meditative thought. In the preface to his *Reveries ou Mémoires sur l’Art de la Guerre*, published posthumously in 1756, but written in 1732, the distinguished French General Maurice de Saxe (1696-1750) “appears to suggest that the book should not be taken too seriously.”⁵⁹ Yet it is, according to the noted military historian, Azar Gat, “a comprehensive treatise on war ... which deals with the details of army organisation, battle formation armament” in addition to strategy and tactics, and treats war as a science.⁶⁰ In contemporary French, the usage of *rêverie* is the same as in English, that is, in the sense of aimless thought.⁶¹

⁵⁵ A translation of the fifth walk produced by the Office National Suisse du Tourisme, produced in 1962, was given the English title: *The Reveries of the Solitary Stroller: the Fifth Stroll*.

⁵⁶ Raymond, M., “Introduction aux *Reveries*” *Œuvres Complètes*, eds., Gagnebin, B. & Raymond, M., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard, Vol.1, 1959, pp.lxxi-xcv, p.lxxviii.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.lxxvi-iii.

⁵⁸ *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française*, deuxième édition, Rey A., Dictionnaires Le Robert, Paris, 2001, v.5, p.2118. *Le Grand Robert* also cites Richelet 1680 to confirm *rêverie* in the sense of meditation: “production d’esprit qu’on fait à force de rêver.”

⁵⁹ Gat, A., *A History of Military Thought: from Enlightenment to Cold War*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.33.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶¹ *Le Grand Robert*, *op. cit.*

Rousseau appears to have been aware of both meanings of *rêverie*. In the first walk, which serves an introduction explaining the project of the *Reveries*, Rousseau writes that he sees his redemption as a process of meditation. “If by meditating on my inner life I am able to order it better and remedy the faults that may remain there, my meditations will not be in vain” (*R.S.W.*, 1, 33). The very next paragraph starts with the contradictory assertion that “these pages will be no more than a formless record of my reveries” (p.32). Rousseau oscillates between talking of his “most careful self examination” (p.33) and giving “free reign to my thoughts and let[ting] my ideas follow their natural course, unrestricted and unconfined” (*R.S.W.*, 2, 35). Towards the end of the book, Rousseau is no clearer: “Sometimes my reveries end in meditation, but more frequently my meditations end in reveries” (*R.S.W.*, 7, 107).

Rousseau achieves psychic harmony through reveries, but reverie can only be achieved by meditation on nature and a considered examination of his psyche. Ultimately it is an *intellectual* activity that brings Rousseau *physical* sensitivity and repose because it enables him to achieve psychic harmony through living by his senses. Astoundingly, Rousseau uses contemplation to renounce philosophical endeavours. This idea can be given context by recalling that natural man was psychologically unitary. Civilisation and rationality made him fractured and conflicted. Now, Rousseau, a civilised man, must renounce his rationality. The only tool he has to quieten his imagination and his intellect is his intellect. Through a process of meditation – an intellectual and fixed activity – he can lose himself in self-contemplation. Once he is lost in contemplation he can gain meaning through existence.

The process culminates in the fifth walk, which recalls the time spent on the Island of Saint Pierre. Rousseau was seeking refuge on the Island after his temporary stay in the village of Môtiers near Neuchâtel was brought to an end after locals, egged on by the local minister, Montmollin, had stoned his house.⁶² Rousseau describes himself “stretching out full-length” in the boat drifting on the lake and abandoning

⁶² For an account of how and why Rousseau was on the Island of Saint-Pierre, see Cranston, M., *The Solitary Self: Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Exile and Adversity*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997, pp.125-6, 133-139.

himself in idle thought (*R.S.W.*, 5, 85). The pose itself – stretched out in the sun – reminds the reader of the cat-like existence of natural man. Rousseau also describes how he stretches out on the shores of the lake where:

the noise of the waves and the movement of the water, taking hold of my senses and driving all other agitation from my soul, would plunge it into a delicious reverie in which night often stole upon me unaware. The ebb and flow of the water, its continuous yet undulating noise, kept lapping against my ears and my eyes, ... and it was enough to make me pleasurable aware of my existence, without troubling myself with thought (*R.S.W.*, 5, 86-7).

Abandoning oneself to the ebb and flow of the water was not, for Rousseau, an easy process.

What Rousseau finds attractive about solitude in nature is that he is his own master and is free from the judgement and tribulations of other men. “These hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am completely myself and my own master, with nothing to distract or hinder me, the only ones when I can truly say that I am what nature meant me to be” (*R.S.W.*, 2, 35). In the tenth and final – and uncompleted – walk Rousseau recalls – the irony that he is seeking solace in the past is conspicuous - that he had once before experienced the same rural simplicity and solitude in the blithe *laissez aller* of his youth spent with Mme de Warens. At this point, the extent of Rousseau’s concept of self-mastery becomes clear.

There is not a day when I do not remember with joy and loving emotion that one short time in my life [as a young man with Mme de Warens] when I was myself, completely myself, unmixed and unimpeded, and when I can genuinely claim to have lived. ... I could not bear subjection, and I was perfectly free, or better than free because I was subject only to my own affections and did only what I wanted to do (*R.S.W.*, 10, 153-4).

It is in this sense and in this surrounding that Rousseau achieves his heroic status. He lives entirely according to his desires and no external considerations influence his actions. Rousseau’s existence on the Island of Saint Pierre is a life of idle self-indulgence in a place that exists beyond the constraints of the passing of time

and consequently with no future and no past.⁶³ Such a life is an impossible human life because only an immortal being can live a timeless, self-sufficient life answerable to the cares of no other being. In the final analysis, the *Reveries* once again stands beside the *Phaedo* in advocating a flight from human existence to a life as a god.

Rousseau is seeking a place without time, and it is only an immortal who can experience timelessness.⁶⁴ Moreover, Rousseau understands that only a god can live this life. He claims that in his emotional, professional and physical isolation on the Island of Saint-Pierre on the lake of Bièvre he himself experienced such a god-like self-sufficiency. The source of happiness in such a moment is “[n]othing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence; as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89).⁶⁵ The same reference to a god-like life had already been expressed in the *Confessions*: “my last desire was to live an untroubled life in eternal leisure. It is the life of the blessed in the other world, and I was making it my supreme happiness in this world” (*O.C.*, I, 640).

Such a life is impossible for a human being to sustain. Rousseau only glimpsed an existence unperturbed by fear or hope. The acme of his life, his time on the Island of Saint Pierre, lasted two months and his *Reveries* could but recall the experience some ten years after it occurred (*R.S.W.*, 5, 87).⁶⁶ Rousseau is merely reminiscing about the time in his life when he was freed from the constraints of the past and the future.

⁶³ Of course, it must be said, Rousseau could materially afford to lead a life of idle contemplation because he had just signed a publishing deal with Du Peyrou that secured his financial needs. It was a contract “qui le mettait à l’abri du besoin.” Roddier, *op.cit.*, p. lxxvii

⁶⁴ “The rêveur stands outside himself, and sees his life as a whole. The ecstasy of this intuition frees him momentarily from all constraints, primarily the constraints of time.” Williams, *Rousseau and Romantic Autobiography*, *op. cit.*, p.15.

⁶⁵ “Everything is finished for me on this earth. Neither good nor evil can be done to me by any man. I have nothing left in the world to fear or hope for, and this leaves me in peace at the bottom of the abyss, a poor unfortunate mortal, but as unmoved as god himself.” (1, 31).

⁶⁶ Rousseau was on the island from September 12 to October 25 1765, after which he was expelled by le Petit Conseil de Berne. The fifth promenade was written between 1776-8, but only published posthumously in 1782. Barguillet, *Rousseau ou l’illusion Passionnée*, *op. cit.*, p.9, 20.

One can only speculate whether Rousseau was aware of the tragic irony of his position. Whilst Rousseau declares his new found tranquillity in his isolation and his liberation from the concern of the opinion others hold of him, there is a sense that he protests too hard. France observed that “[m]uch of the book seems to be devoted to a final attempt to set the record straight ... it breathes self-doubt, self pity and self aggrandisement.”⁶⁷ Rousseau fails in his aim of being impervious to the judgement of others. Nor is the *Reveries* free from the need to make more confessions. The fourth walk is an elaborate defence of Rousseau’s tendency to lie. It is moving because Rousseau is so lucid in confronting his tendency to lie and fabricate stories, although he concedes that his defence of these failings is “a very poor excuse” (*R.S.W.*, 4, 80). The ninth walk is yet another attempt to justify placing his children in the foundling home. The *Reveries*’ anxious consideration of others’ judgements is not the composition of a man who no longer has any *amour propre*. A man without any *amour propre*, a solitary man, would not need to write.

Conclusion

Rousseau presents himself as the exemplar of a model of heroic action that lays between the Homeric and Platonic models of heroism. He shares in the Homeric because he presents a non-political type of individual heroism. Like the Homeric hero, he is a man who is whole and has overcome the gap between speech and action and the concomitant gap between being and appearance. Rousseau has mastered the heroic ability to act upon his lofty statements. He also remains close to the Platonic model of heroism because he esteems philosophic contemplation as the highest type of human life. His use for the rewards associated with philosophical contemplation, largely doing nothing, could not be further removed from Plato’s who suggested that philosophical contemplation could lead to mastery in all activities. The *Reveries*, like Plato’s oeuvre, propounds the aristocratic view that only a few people have the ability to achieve this goal.⁶⁸ The ordinary Emile achieves only limited independence from society whilst the philosophic Rousseau soars like a god into the realm of his heroes – Socrates and Plutarch. In doing so, Rousseau abandoned equality.

⁶⁷ France, “Introduction”, *op. cit.*, pp.12-14.

⁶⁸ Cooper, “Human Nature and the Love of Wisdom”, *op. cit.*, p.109.

Cranston suggested Rousseau's youthful experience as a servant led him to take a popular definition of liberty and apply this simplistic definition to political philosophy. "The dream of liberty in the servant's hall is the dream of the elimination of the master."⁶⁹ Freedom viewed as the elimination of the master is, in the hands of the solitary walker, perilously close to approximating a petulant desire to do whatever one pleases whenever one pleases. The idea of independence in the *Social Contract*, the miraculous possession that transformed men into thinking and creative creatures of intelligence, has been reduced in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker* to the ability to reject obligation.

Rousseau's idea of personal heroism in his later years is an extraordinary ambition, even heroic, one might say, in its breathtaking embrace of solipsism. Even if it is never perfectly realised, for a person to draw strength and vitality uniquely from their own sense of self-worth is an achievement beyond the capacity of normal human beings. Yet it is, in the manner represented by Rousseau, inherently limited in its practical scope as a plan for moral regeneration.

Nietzsche proposes that man must undertake three metamorphoses in order to create new values for himself. Firstly, the spirit must transform itself into a camel, who is an animal of burden. The camel then goes to the loneliest of deserts and becomes master of its own space. Secondly, it becomes a lion who engages the dragon called "Thou Shalt" and pronounces a sacred "No!" thus creating its own liberty. A third metamorphosis is still required. The lion must become a child.

The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred "Yes." For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred "Yes" is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Cranston, "Introduction", *Social Contract*, *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁷⁰ Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. Kaufmann, Penguin Books, 1977, p.139.

The child is capable of breaking the “old tablets,”⁷¹ the old conventions and norms, in order to create and “write new values on new tablets.”⁷² Personal independence for Nietzsche leads to creativity and new beginnings. Rousseau in his autobiographical writings presents himself as a lion who pronounces the sacred No. Self-consciously and deliberately, Rousseau remains a lion, and never becomes the child of creation. In consequence, there is an emptiness to Rousseau’s independence. Rousseau has proposed independence in order to do nothing. The source of his contentment rests largely in doing nothing.

Precious *far niente* was my first and greatest pleasure, and I set out to taste it in all its sweetness, and everything I did ... was in fact no more than the delectable and necessary pastime of a man who has dedicated himself to idleness (*oisiveté*) (*R.S.W.*, 5, 83)⁷³

Rousseau did not, of course, spend the rest of his life literally dedicated to idleness. The experience of the Island of Saint Pierre would lead, much later, to the composition of the famous fifth walk, widely recognised as a literary masterpiece. The point is that Rousseau *wished* to remain idle. He would look back at this period in his life and claim “these two months as the happiest of my life, so happy that I would have been content to live all my life in this way, without a moment’s desire for any other state” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 83). Having achieved internal tranquillity and harmony, he expresses no desire to apply his new-found peace of mind to any creative tasks. He does not finish the fifth walk, as one might suspect that he might have, with a claim that he was now ready, with his newly discovered clarity of mind, to finally tackle his proposed political *magnum opus*, of which the *Social Contract* was only to be one small section.⁷⁴ His walk finishes with a note of regret that he had been unable to spend the rest of his life on the island “where my sweetest occupation would be to dream to my heart’s content” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 91).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.314.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.325.

⁷³ Cf. *Confessions*, Bk, 12, *O.C.I* p.640, “my last desire was to live an untroubled life in eternal leisure.”

⁷⁴ *S.C*, III, 15, 143; *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, *op. cit.*, p.194.

Rousseau, it would appear, wishes to lay on the grassy banks of the lake, throw in a fishing line, think aimlessly about himself and drift off to sleep in the afternoon sun. Upon waking with a shiver once the sun has set, Rousseau wishes to wander home and have his physical needs easily furnished. In nature, the miraculous oak tree supplied man with food and shelter. On the island of Saint Pierre, Rousseau's long suffering mistress, Thérèse Lavasseur, would, it must be presumed, carry out the same providing role.

Rousseau, who, in the *Social Contract*, had been so influential in adopting ancient ideals of human potential within a modern framework of equality, would end his life advocating a life free of any and all constraints. It was an ideal of independence beyond even that proposed by the most ardent advocates of negative freedom. Rousseau spent a life contemplating the idea of independence and at the end of his life upheld an impossible, godly independence for himself. The final disillusionment for the political scholar of Rousseau is that his ultimate use for freedom was to do nothing with his new peace of mind. The solitary walker's refusal to act and to instead seek solace in self-recognition and self-satisfaction excludes him from playing any role in the *polis* and marks the final disappearance of heroic models of citizenship. Moreover, the solitary walker excludes himself from all interaction with others and is a model of emulation for those seeking refuge, not those seeking heroism.

CONCLUSION

Homer and Plato share a belief in the enormous potential of some men and a corresponding disappointment in the condition of men “as men are now.” Rousseau, by contrast, considers all men have an enormous innate potential that has been corroded by civilisation. All three thinkers were saddened and dismayed at the condition of their fellows, whom they considered weak, effeminate, deceitful, and mere shadows of men. They believed that man did not need to be like this; he could be grand, noble and achieve so much more than he did. Homer, Plato and Rousseau show their contemporaries and their subsequent readers that they need not be confined to the mediocrity in which they live. They have the capacity to escape from the dross of humanity and become heroes. Nietzsche equally shared this disappointment in his contemporaries. In fact, Nietzsche’s vitriol against the common man exceeds that of Homer, Plato or Rousseau. He also offers an image of a better type of man, one who has the ability to assert himself and create his own values and norms rather than meekly accepting the dictates of common morality. This man, in his various guises, is called the “aristocratic,” “noble” or “master” spirit and is given form in the character of Zarathustra.

Nietzsche is drawn upon in this conclusion as a means to overview Homer and Plato’s contribution to the development of heroic modes of thought and action. Nietzsche’s proposed formula for an heroic character who can soar above the morality of common man also exemplifies the disappearance from the landscape of political philosophy of models of state with a normative intent on creating heroes and confirms the argument of this thesis. Rousseau’s abandonment of political modes of transforming man marked the death knell of normative models of heroic citizens. Writing a century after Rousseau, Nietzsche bears out the inability of normative models of citizenship to exert a heroic transformation upon ordinary men.

Homer celebrates human life and thereby opens the possibility of human heroism. Odysseus cannot accept immortality offered by Calypso on her island because he wants more *human* life. Immortality spent sipping ambrosia and sharing the goddess’ bed holds no appeal for Odysseus because he craves the life of man. By

holding human life as the highest ideal available to man, Homer, according to Nietzsche, reveres the so-called wisdom of Silenus. Silenus was Dionysius' companion who advised the old King Midas that the best and most desirable thing for man was "not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best thing for you – is to die soon" (*Birth of Tragedy*, § 3, p.22).¹ In contrast to the wisdom of Silenus, the Homeric heroes bask in the "rich and triumphant existence" (*B.T.*, § 3, 22) of human life. The Homeric hero's will to live is best captured by Achilles' claim to Odysseus when the two meet in the world of the dead: "I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire (*thēs*) to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead" (11, 490).² In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche refers to this glorification of human life as the Apolline order and in the *Genealogy of Morals* it is known as the aristocratic, noble or master mentality.

The knightly-aristocratic value-judgement presupposes a powerful physicality, a rich, burgeoning, even overflowing health, as well as those things that serve to preserve it – war, adventure, hunting, dancing, competitive games, and everything which involves strong, free, high-spirited activity (*Genealogy of Morals*, I, 7, p.19).³

Nietzsche's description does not uniquely relate to Homeric society, but it accords with the qualities I attribute to the Homeric heroes in the first chapter of this thesis. The Homeric hero is physically strong and he acts without restraint. He freely follows his instincts allowing him to act with transparency in any situation that life throws at him. He strives to establish himself in a hierarchical pecking order and his domain is the battlefield, competitive games and adventure. The reward for success in these endeavours is immortal glory that outlives the hero and ensures that he becomes a model for men who follow to emulate. It is the Homeric hero's *will to power*, that is, his ability to impose himself and his love of life that attracts Nietzsche.

¹ Nietzsche, F., *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* [1871], trans. Whiteside, S., ed. Tanner, M., Penguin Books, London, 1993.

² Hesiod (*Works and Days*, 602) informs us that the fate of the *thēs* is worse than that of a slave, because at least the slave has a position, whereas the *thēs* is no more than a vagabond.

³ Nietzsche, F., *On the Genealogy of Morals* [1887], trans. Smith, D., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998. Here after cited in the text as *GoM* followed by the page number to this edition.

As a result of Homer's celebration of human existence, "[o]ne of the *Iliad's* outstanding contributions to human civilization, for good and for evil, is its concept of the hero."⁴ Homer's glorification of human life is empowering and liberating for humanity. It enables man to shed the shackles imposed by his position as the only mortal in an immortal universe and consider his existence as the supreme existence. By obliterating the limitations on human life and lifting the ceiling of human achievement, Homer gives birth to the hope of supreme human existence, that is, heroism. Indeed, "his magic is worked through poetry and, transfiguring what is lowly and base – human existence conceived as a cruel and irredeemable punishment by the gods – into something quite precious – the possibility of a life so glorious that it propels its victor to the precarious position of inviting the envy of gods."⁵ Homeric man never becomes a god but his life is so exalted that it enthralled gods. The Homeric hero is rightly called a hero because he consistently acts in a manner that is beyond the human norm and in doing so becomes a model of emulation for other men. Only certain men, those of noble birth, are capable of achieving heroic status, and their heroism is not dependent upon acting in a manner that benefits others.

By modern standards of judgement, the Homeric hero is an estimable but flawed character. As was demonstrated in the second chapter, the Homeric hero is admired as a man of action who is never incapacitated, but he is egocentric. He pursues his aim of glory regardless of how it affects the larger community surrounding him. Alasdair MacIntyre writes, with a tone of regret for the simplicity of Homeric man's moral codes, "[n]obody now can be a Hector."⁶ It is, however, doubtful whether Hector would be unanimously praised today, and it is equally doubtful whether many people would really want to be a Hector. If an Achilles or Hector-like character were to enter onto the public stage today, he might be respected, feared and possibly envied, but he would not be an exemplary model of human behaviour. The Homeric hero's ultimate sacrifice is for himself. He lacks selflessness and, by modern standards, a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the

⁴Grant, M., *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, Phoenix Giant, London, [Revised Issue, 1989, Reissued 1998], p.50.

⁵ Acampora, C., "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 24, 2002, pp.25-53.

⁶MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Duckworth, London, 1981, p.119.

benefit of others is considered an essential element of heroism. Whilst ruminating on the deeds of the New York firefighters and emergency workers in the wake of the World Trade Centre attack, Victor Hanson, a military historian and classicist but equally known today as a member of the neo-conservative movement in the United States, was most struck by their selflessness. It was, in Hanson's view, this selfless disregard for personal safety in the rush to help others that guarantees the heroic status of the emergency workers.⁷ A Homeric hero would instinctively charge into danger but not to help complete strangers.

Homer's notion of human achievement is premised on individual realisation. He ponders man's relationship to the world he lives in and he asks what man is and what he can, *could* and *ought* to be. As he questions what the best life for an individual man is, Homer deals with philosophy. He does not, however, engage in what might rightly be called political philosophy, that is, philosophy that has as "its object political things: the foundations of political community, the ends and means of their action, war and peace in the interior and in relation to other political communities."⁸ This thesis has shown that the central questions of political philosophy, "questions of the best political order, of the right life, of just life, of necessary weight of authority, knowledge and force"⁹ are largely absent from the epics. As was demonstrated in chapter two, the Homeric hero engages in communal action and asserts his own power within a community, but he does so in the absence of a *polis*. Homer does not consider how the realm of political organisation could best be constituted. These questions of political philosophy are central to the Platonic oeuvre. If Homer was the starting point of the heroic project, the turn to the political marked the marginalisation of Homer's contribution to the development of heroic models of thought and action in Western political thought.

⁷ Hanson, V., "Here's to the Heroes," *The San Diego Union Tribune*, November 25, 2001, p.G6. Hanson was formerly Professor of classical studies at California State University, and is now a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. His neo-conservative credentials can be seen in: Hanson, V., "The Real Humanists," *National Review On-Line*, November 19, 2004, where he attributes "the brilliance of the U.S. military" in bringing an "end [to] the old sick calculus of Middle East tyrannies" and ensuring "the most humane developments in the Middle East in a century."

⁸ Meier, H., "Why Political Philosophy?" *Review of Metaphysics*, 56, December 2002, pp.385-407, p.390. Meier distinguishes what he considers true political philosophy from "the inflated use of the epithet 'political philosophy' to describe arbitrary political opinions, programs, and convictions" p.390.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The turn to the political is widely attributed to Socrates or Plato. Aristotle notes that Socrates was the first person to study man rather than nature (*Metaphysics* 978b, 1078b). Socrates focuses on man and how he can live with man, rather than nature and how man lives in it. Whilst I have suggested that it is Socrates himself who turns philosophy to political questions, it is not ultimately of great importance to the flow of history whether it is Socrates, or Socrates late in his life, or indeed Socrates in the hands of Plato who compels the philosopher to devote himself to the organisation of human affairs in the polity.

Human life, for Socrates, is an impure existence. Chapter three showed that the philosopher leaves the shadow world of opinion and false knowledge behind and emerges in the sunshine of a higher world where he learns to see with clarity and understanding. The landscape outside the dark cave of human existence is so resplendent that the philosopher would happily spend the rest of his life contemplating the captivating spectacle of true knowledge. Yet, as is demonstrated in chapter four, the philosopher returns to the affairs of men and reluctantly turns his attention to political issues. Socrates and Plato never resolve the issue of why the philosopher would occupy himself with human affairs. Indeed, the problem of why the escapee from the cave would return to the cave to liberate his former fellows continues to haunt political philosophers who study the ancients. The best answer this thesis can offer is that the philosopher must regrettably, but inevitably, live amongst men whilst living on this earthly world. If he is to live with men, he must be capable of loving them and for their sake as well as his he must order their communal lives correctly. As the philosopher is the only person with the knowledge and personal characteristics required to lead a just *polis*, he takes the task upon himself.

By obliging the heroic philosopher to return to the affairs of men, Socrates and Plato extend the question of how to live well to the question of how men can live well together in a political community. The philosophical hero enters the realm of political philosophy and ponders questions about political order, justice and living well in conjunction with other men as well as nature and the universe. Socrates and Plato found a role within the *polis* for the exercise of heroism and transformed the heroic man into an heroic citizen. By engaging the heroic philosopher in the creation of the

polity and in the practice of politics in this polity, Socrates and Plato gave life to the concept of heroism for centuries to follow.

By establishing a strict doctrine intended to form supreme human excellence, Socrates and Plato also extended the notion of heroism from its Homeric foundation. As a set of guidelines to heroic behaviour, the “heroic code” of the Homeric epics was fairly ambiguous. There is no ambiguity to Socrates and Plato’s scheme. The Platonic formula is, as Nietzsche succinctly captures: “Reason = virtue = happiness ... one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark desires by producing permanent *daylight* – the daylight of reason” (*Twilight of the Idols*, 10, p.43).¹⁰ The philosopher is empowered with real knowledge and sees the world with clarity and understanding. This clarity enables the philosopher to undertake any human activity supremely well. Socrates, as was seen at the beginning of the third chapter, can do anything as well if not better than any other man. According to Lash’s definition of classical heroism cited in the introduction of this thesis – whereby heroes display “a consistent capacity for action that surpasses the norm of man”¹¹ – Socrates is the most complete heroic character encountered in this thesis. He also meets the modern insistence that a hero must sacrifice himself for a higher cause. In doing so, he paves the way for altruistic sacrifice for others to become an essential consideration in determining heroic status. Socrates dies for the truth and in the service of his attempts to make communal life better for all citizens.

Unlike the Homeric model of heroism, the philosophic heroism of Socrates and Plato is founded on an escape from the human condition. For Socrates and Plato, human life is marked by an uneasy cohabitation of the divine and mortal components of man. The aim of the philosophical life is to allow what is divine in man to act unimpeded by what is human. Accessing true knowledge requires isolating the divine *pyschē* and liberating it from the demands of man’s mortal body. Homer celebrated man, whilst Socrates and Plato wished to transcend the mortal and human component of man. Plato’s conception of the hero as one who rises above human life mitigates

¹⁰ Nietzsche, F., *Twilight of the Idols* [1889] and *The Antichrist* [1895], trans. Hollindale, R., Penguin Books, London, 1990. Here after referred to in the text as *T.I* followed by section number and page number.

¹¹ Lash, J., *The Hero: Manhood and Power*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, p.5.

against the very notion of heroism because it precludes human existence as the highest achievement possible. Socrates can face death because the loss of his body does not impede his life. Indeed, the loss of the body is perhaps the greatest thing that can happen to the philosopher. Socrates' calm acceptance of death portrayed in the *Phaedo* and captured in David's painting, seen on the frontispiece of this thesis, borders on eager anticipation of death. This striving for a way out of human life entrapped in a human body is derided by Nietzsche in the *Genealogy of Morals* as a "life against life" (*GoM* III, 13, 99). The *Phaedo* comes very close to restating the wisdom of Silenus in advocating that the best thing a man can do is to die.

Plato resists the call of Silenus' wisdom. In the *Republic* and in the later dialogues, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*, he attempts to make the philosophical life attractive and useful for man on this earth. Nietzsche was correct when he observed that "[f]or a long time, the inactive, brooding and unwarlike character of the instincts of contemplative men aroused deep mistrust all around" (*GoM*, III, 10, 94). Plato was aware of the mistrust of philosophers, whom, as he acknowledged, were considered "half-dead" (*Phaedo* 64d) by his Athenian contemporaries. There is considerable merit in Angela Hobbs' argument that the inclusion of *thymos* in the tripartition of the soul in the *Republic* was an attempt to make the philosophical life appear more manly and hence more appealing to young men. Plato's attempts to secure a way for the workings of the divine *psychē* to manifest itself in human action only partially succeed. Plato denies the value of human life throughout his entire corpus by insisting that the best life is entirely dependent on knowledge that remains founded on metaphysical knowledge that is uniquely accessible to the divine *psychē*. Plato cannot satisfactorily answer Aristotle's criticism that metaphysical knowledge, whether it is knowledge of the eternal, the Good or the doctrine of the mean, is of little use to human affairs.

The great tragedy, according to Nietzsche is that Plato's advocacy of a life against life, a life that denies itself, was adopted by the Christian Church and became the dominant philosophical position in the Western tradition. "[Plato is] an antecedent Christian – he already has the good as the supreme concept ... And how much there still is of Plato in the concept 'Church', in the structure, system, practise of the Church!" (*T.I.* 11, 2, p,117). This Platonic strain is particularly prevalent in

Saint Paul. Nietzsche derides Paul because unlike the other Apostles he does not write a biography that celebrates Jesus' life. Instead he produces an "account of the injustice of the *end* of Jesus' life."¹² Paul does not write a gospel because, for him, the *human* life of Christ is "nearly irrelevant."¹³ For Paul, according to Nietzsche, the significance of Christ is the metaphysical miracle, the transcendence from human life. Christ is stripped of his ability to serve as a model of human emulation because no human is capable of "that sort of redemption."¹⁴ The heroic philosopher who strives to escape life is afflicted by the same limitation. By denying the full grandeur of human life, Plato subverts the ideal of an heroic human life as the highest model of human emulation.

Nonetheless, Plato enabled the ideal of heroism to prosper because his model of heroic life was lived in a *polis*. The heroic philosopher applied his metaphysical knowledge to the creation and then the running of the state. On Aristotle's view, "[t]he *polis* comes into existence for the sake of living, but remains in existence for the sake of living well" (*Politics* I.ii, 1252b). Once the state was recognised as providing the most successful means of communal human life, there was no room for Homer's heroes as models of superior human achievement because the qualities essential to citizenship, such as restraint, moderation and the ability to subordinate personal interests to communal interests, are antithetical to Homeric heroism. Plato's model for heroism is, however, in many senses anti-heroic because it dismisses the very possibility of human life being the supreme existence. Thus Plato never entirely displaced "Homer as the educator of Greece" (*Republic* 606e) – and consequently the West more broadly – because thinkers who craved for supreme human types, thinkers like Nietzsche, still turned to Homer. "Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the real antagonism – on one side, the sincerest man of beyond, the philosopher who most defames life; on the other, the poet who involuntarily deifies it, the *golden nature*" (*GoM*, III, 25, p.129). Nietzsche wishes to insert himself into this contest and revive Homeric ideals in order to fortify his own ideals.

¹² Acampora, "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul," *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.38

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The real historical defeat of the Platonic model of heroism exercised in a state did not come from thinkers wishing to resurrect Homer, but as the third part of this thesis proved, from the modern challenge of equality. Rousseau was instrumental in mounting this challenge. He yearned for human equality whilst simultaneously wishing to maintain the ideal of superior human existence.

“I hate Rousseau,” Nietzsche declares with typical bravado in the *Twilight of the Idols* (10, 48, p.113). Nietzsche’s problem with Rousseau is twofold. Rousseau’s first crime is that he attributes man’s degradation to the social and political environment – namely, societal dependence. Rousseau, for Nietzsche, was a man of rancour, infected with *ressentiment*, who “seeks the cause of his wretchedness in the ruling class” (*Will To Power* 98, p.62).¹⁵ A man should, for Nietzsche, accept responsibility for his condition and seek a resolution to his condition within himself. Rousseau’s second great crime was the monstrosity of the “doctrine of equality!” (*T.I.* 10, 48, p.113). It is difficult to know whether Nietzsche understood that these two crimes were, for Rousseau, intrinsically linked.¹⁶

Rousseau’s famous view that man was good but was made bad by civilisation enables him to consider heroic potential as latent in *all* men. Natural man was good because he enjoyed independence. If civilised man could recapture his innate independence, he, too, could achieve a better standard of life. Equating independence with heroism may appear to stretch conceptual definitions until we consider the depth to which a man without independence can sink. When the norm of man is that of dependent civilised men, a man with independence, even the rudimentary

¹⁵ Nietzsche, F., *Will to Power*, trans. Kaufmann, W., & Hollingdale, R., Vintage Books, New York, 1968.

¹⁶ Nietzsche’s understanding of Rousseau is generally considered to be limited. “Rousseau’s dionysiac return to nature, his moral pathos, and his abandonment to the elemental forces which make revolutions and ruin states – these were the traits which constituted the very dangers of Nietzsche’s own temperament and philosophy. Hence he generally reviled Rousseau.” Kaufmann, W., *Nietzsche*, [Third Edition] Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1968, p.142. Ansell-Pearson came to a very similar conclusion to Kaufmann in *Nietzsche Contra Rousseau*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993. Cf. “Ansell-Pearson persuasively demonstrates not only that Nietzsche misunderstood Rousseau, but also many of the criticisms Nietzsche levels against Rousseau would be more accurately addressed by Nietzsche himself ... the tension between the ethical and political of his own thought mirrors a similar tension that he detects in the thought of Rousseau.” Conway, D., “Nietzsche Contra Rousseau” [book review] *The Review of Metaphysics*, 47(1), September 1993, pp.133-4, p.133.

independence of natural man, consistently acts above the human norm and, in Rousseau's view, becomes a model of emulation for other men. A man with independence confers with Lash's definition of a hero because he is consistently superior to the human norm and serves as a model of emulation. Independence can only be secured in isolation or in a political association where all citizens share independence equally by asserting their control over the processes of political authority.

The fifth chapter concentrated on Rousseau's noble attempt to conjure a polity where all men could prosper and reach heroic heights of collective and individual excellence by equally sharing in political authority. Rousseau's view of nature meant that all men could be equally heroic and his collective solution to societal independence presented in the *Social Contract* depends on all men equally realising this potential. The *Social Contract* views natural man as enviable for his independence, purity and ease of existence, but he is a "limited, stupid animal" (*S.C.*, I, 9, 65). The polity of the *Social Contract* aims to make him "a creature of intelligence and a man" (*S.C.*, I, 9, 65). Strong and Meier argue that these passages should be taken literally as bestial natural man is made into a man.¹⁷ Rejecting the view of natural man as bestial, I framed this transformation of man under a well-conceived contract in terms of transforming a man into a hero. Plato makes a hero into an elite citizen. The philosophic hero enjoys an easily identifiable superiority over the rest of humanity and Plato considers that this superiority should be utilised for the benefit of all by engaging the philosopher into a position of political leadership. Rousseau, by contrast, attempts to reshape notions of heroic citizenship so that it could extend to all men.

The project of the *Social Contract* failed due to man's limitations. The men who surrounded Rousseau were not the men of his imagination. Civilised man was a miserable and cruel creature who was incapable of exercising independence on the grand scale provided by a state. Thus, Rousseau's late political works abandoned the

¹⁷ Strong, T., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, 1994, p.103; Meier, H., "Discourse on the Origin and the Foundations of Inequality Amongst Men: On the Intention of Rousseau's most Philosophical Work", *Interpretation*, 16(2), Winter 1988-9, pp. 211-227, p.221.

notion that a well-conceived polity had the power to redeem men and transform them into something more noble and grand. His attempt to reconcile heroism with equality is his enormous contribution to the development of heroic models of thought and action in Western political thought. Yet his failure to achieve this reconciliation signalled the demise of normative models of heroism exercised in the political sphere. The doctrine of equality, which Rousseau was so fundamental in establishing in the lexicon of Western political thought, destroyed the ambition of heroes acting as models of aspiration and emulation. For a hero to remain as such, he must excel beyond the human norm and differentiate himself from his peers. The fraternity of heroes sought in the *Social Contract* hoped to raise the norm of all men together and thus rejected the hierarchical notions of human worth that are inherent in aspiring to heroism.

Rousseau's model of individual redemption offered in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, provides a path for a particularly gifted individual to regain the wholeness and independence of natural man. The sixth chapter demonstrated that the psychological and material independence and the joy of existence that Rousseau captures in his last days could only be acquired by an individual existing in isolation. Natural man was a solitary creature, so the supreme human life built on replicating natural man rejects political or even social interaction.

The *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, especially the fifth promenade, is a masterpiece of modern literature that opened "new horizons of language and style"¹⁸ for generations of subsequent writers and artists.¹⁹ The influence of the *Reveries* has been enormous in validating the world of the imagination as a refuge from the suffering of real life. "Starting a powerful trend in Western culture, Rousseau attributes greater significance to life lived in the imagination than to the world of

¹⁸ Williams, D., *Rousseau: Les Rêveries du Promeneur Solitaire*, Grant and Cutler, London, 1984, p.9.

¹⁹ The *Reveries* is considered a founding text of the Romantic Movement. After quoting a passage from the fifth walk, Novello writes: "With those words from the "Reveries," Rousseau launched the Romantic movement." Novello, M., "Jean Jacques Rousseau, Father of Government Schools," Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference, University of Sussex, 2-5 September 1999, p.3 of 12.

action.”²⁰ Human beings have, of course, always sought solace and an escape from the trials and difficulties of life in the realm of imagination. But by recording his reveries, Rousseau crystallised such sentiments in a concrete form, which could provide a model for others to express similar feelings.

The life of blissful, solitary existence spent collecting and studying plants is not, however, a model for citizens. “Rousseau describes the state of continuous, fulfilled, timeless present, a state in which the soul finds a solid enough base on which it can rest itself entirely and on which it can gather its whole being.”²¹ The source of happiness in such a moment is “[n]othing external to us, nothing apart from ourselves and our own existence; as long as this state lasts we are self-sufficient like God” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89).²² The life of perfect self-sufficient contemplation is of course an ascetic ideal that Nietzsche would deride as a “life against life.” Rousseau himself is aware of this. The life advocated in the *Reveries* is not for “most men” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89). Firstly, not many would be capable of achieving such a life, and, secondly, it “should give people a distaste for the active life” (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89).²³

But an unfortunate man who has been excluded from human society, and can do nothing more in this world to serve or benefit himself or others, may be allowed to seek in this state a compensation for human joys, a compensation which neither fortune nor mankind can take away from him (*R.S.W.*, 5, 89).

When Rousseau portrays the last years of his life as the supreme life, he limits ideals of heroism to individual men. In fact, his heroic effort to break out of societal life and seek recognition from within the self limits the pursuit of heroic fulfilment to the self-serving individual to an even greater extent than Homer’s model of heroic men.

²⁰ Ryn, C., “Imaginative Origins of Modernity: Life as Daydream and Nightmare,” *Humanitas*, X(2), 1997, p.5 of 13, <http://www.nhinet.org>. Even today, Rousseau continues to act as a direct inspiration for artists, as witnessed by the work of the American photographer Pauline Thomas who has taken a series of photos corresponding to the ten walks of the *Reveries*. Thomas’ work can be seen at <http://www.heartofart.com>.

²¹ Meier, “Why Political Philosophy?” *op. cit.*, p.406.

²² “Everything is finished for me on this earth. Neither good nor evil can be done to me by any man. I have nothing left in the world to fear or hope for, and this leaves me in peace at the bottom of the abyss, a poor unfortunate mortal, but as unmoved as god himself.” (1, 31).

²³ Cf Meier, “Why Political Philosophy?” *op. cit.*, p.407.

Unlike the Homeric hero who lives in a community and depends on that community for recognition of his heroic status, the solitary walker has no interaction whatsoever with other people. The *Reveries* rejects communal interaction and certainly excludes a role for the *polis* in an heroic life. The fact that Rousseau's autobiographical texts announced the failure of normative models of heroic citizens is underlined by Nietzsche, who, writing a century later, would also propose a model of heroism that rejected the constraints of communal life and political association.

Nietzsche considers common men as "the subservient, the dog-like, who immediately lie on their backs, the humble ... who never offer resistance, who swallow poisonous spittle and evil glances, the all-too-patient, all-suffering, always satisfied" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 302-303).²⁴ The common men "have become smaller, and they are becoming smaller and smaller; *but this is due to their doctrine of happiness and virtue*. For they are modest in virtue too – because they want contentment. But only a modest virtue gets along with contentment" (*Zarathustra*, p.281). The satisfaction with "wretched contentment," (*Zarathustra*, p.152) which to the modern reader appears as an oxymoron, is the source of a great many of common man's shortcomings. Contentment is wretched, for Nietzsche, because it leads to moderation, which in turn leads to mediocrity, uniformity, conformity and subservience. Nietzsche's insistence on the need for a man to reject external influence – including the influence exerted by citizenship – in order to reach his full potential evokes the path to independence advocated in the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, a work that Nietzsche might well not have read.²⁵

Nietzsche offers a model of man who can overcome this mediocrity, but it is not a model for life in a *polis*. In fact, for Nietzsche the constricting nature of political associations plays a role in the mortifying complacency and small-mindedness of modern man by dictating moral imperatives. People "lose themselves" in the state (*Zarathustra*, p.162). Nietzsche's Zarathustra is celebrated as a creator of new values. Nietzsche is not opposed to reason, or moral values and judgements *per*

²⁴ Nietzsche, F., *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883-5], in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. & ed. Kaufmann, W., Penguin Books, London, 1977, pp.103-339.

²⁵ Brodjer, T., "Nietzsche's Reading and Private Library, 1885-1889," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 58(4), 1997, 663-680.

se, he is opposed to the whole scale adoption of the values and reason of others.²⁶ To hold as an ideal for man the creator of new values presupposes a process of continual regeneration that is at odds with the necessary conservatism of state structures. A citizen must, to a certain extent, adopt the moral values that uphold a legal system and the political values that uphold political institutions. The creation of new values may or may not be aristocratic and inherently hierarchical, but it is individualistic. A man must, by and of himself, create values for himself. Consequently, there can be no room for the *polis* in Nietzsche's concept of an overman in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* who establishes his own values. Indeed, the *polis* is an impediment to achieving the sacred "yes" of the Child who has overcome external influence.²⁷

Nietzsche rejects equality as a worthy goal for humanity. Furthermore, any potential move within his work towards creating a new polity, of which a Zarathustra-type overman is a legislating philosopher, is made by allusion.²⁸ By rejecting equality and without offering a clearly defined model of polity, Nietzsche fails to advance the project of an heroic citizen and, indeed, evokes an earlier period of Homeric individual heroic action and Rousseauian romantic isolation. Nietzsche's engagement with Homer is, of course, premised on a more developed ambition than simply resurrecting the forceful and unbridled human passions of the Homeric heroes. Nietzsche wishes to resurrect Homer's view of human life as praiseworthy. Acampora considers that "Zarathustra becomes the Nietzschean replacement for the Homeric heroes."²⁹ Zarathustra fights his internal demons, "he struggles to overcome

²⁶ Acampora, "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul," *op. cit.*, p.30.

²⁷ Cf. Velkley, R., "The Tension in the Beautiful: On Culture and Civilization in Rousseau and German Philosophy," *The Legacy of Rousseau*, eds. Orwin, C. & Tarcov, N., University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1997, pp. 65-86, p.76.

²⁸ McIntyre argues that Nietzsche does offer a legislator-philosopher in the mould of Plato's philosopher King. The evidence for this claim is highly speculative. McIntyre's starting point is a quote from *Human all too Human* §628: "Then I recalled the words of Plato and suddenly they spoke to my heart: *Nothing human is worthy of being taken very seriously; nonetheless* –" McIntyre considers that with "this little word, "nonetheless," and the pregnant silence that follows it, the political life of the philosopher is defined ... he begins to create a place, a new city, a new and higher man and a new seriousness." As McIntyre's thesis that Nietzsche offers a legislator is almost entirely dependent upon what Nietzsche left unsaid, these claims are not overly convincing. McIntyre, Alex, "Virtuosos of Contempt: An Investigation of Nietzsche's Political Philosophy Through Certain Platonic Political Ideas," *Nietzsche-Studien*, vol.21, 1992, pp.184-210, pp.184-5.

²⁹ Acampora, "Nietzsche Contra Homer, Socrates, and Paul," *op. cit.*, p.40. For reasons left unexplained Acampora considers Odysseus the ultimate hero with whom Zarathustra must compete.

his vanity, his self-ignorance, his shame, and his fear.”³⁰ A very different set of obstacles than those facing a Homeric hero, but both models centre on the self and celebrate human life. Nietzsche himself is aware that any political application of his ideals necessarily involves invoking political principles firmly entrenched in the past. Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, one of Nietzsche’s political idols is Napoleon. The Revolution was, for Nietzsche, one of the great historical triumphs of *ressentiment* and it could be traced to the “Rousseauesque morality” (*T.I.*, 10,48, 113) of equality that reared up against heroic ideals. In the face of the Revolution’s calamitous celebration of equality and mediocrity, Napoleon appeared. And:

the ideal of the ancients itself emerged in *flesh and blood* and with unheard-of splendour before the eyes and conscience of mankind ... Like a last gesture in the *other* direction, Napoleon appeared, the most individual and most belatedly born man ever to have existed, and in him the incarnation of the problem of the *noble ideal as such* – consider *what* a problem it is, Napoleon, this synthesis of the *inhuman* and the *superhuman*... (*GoM*, I, 16, p.36).

By Nietzsche’s estimation, Napoleon personifies an earlier ideal of a Homeric noble spirit who shamelessly bends the world to his will and has been regrettably overtaken by the dominance of the spirit of *ressentiment* that preaches equality amongst unequals. Nietzsche’s adulation of Napoleon is testimony to the consciously retrospective glance of his philosophy. There is neither room for Nietzsche’s self-asserting individual nor the isolated self-sufficient walker of Rousseau’s *Reveries* in a world that has submerged itself in the ideal of equality promoted by the *Social Contract* and celebrated by the Revolution.

The ambition of tempering heroic ideals so that they could extend beyond an individual and conform to life in a polity as a heroic citizen has been shown to be a failed project. But how should heroes themselves be judged? The models of individual heroes encountered in this thesis, such as Achilles and Hector, Socrates, and Rousseau himself, were all found to be wanting in some respect. The Homeric hero’s refusal ever to be incapacitated inspires admiration. He is the ultimate can-do-

³⁰ *Ibid.*

man. He remains, however, limited in his sphere of action. Furthermore, he is selfish and has a capacity for cruelty and brutality that potentially inspire as much fear and revulsion as admiration.³¹ Socrates could do anything supremely well, but his excellence was founded on striving to transcend the human condition and hence he never overcomes the suspicion that he is a model of emulation that is simply beyond human capacity. The Homeric hero was a highly improbable character but not humanly impossible. The philosophical hero, on the other hand, appears impossible. Rousseau's proposed fraternity of heroes was, on his own account, doomed to failure. His model of individual isolation and introspection fails to offer possible outlets for the heroism it claims for itself. Despite these disappointments, the seductive appeal of heroism persists. We yearn for a hero as an image of what is possible – at once beyond the scope of our achievement but at the same time within our grasp. Denying the possibility of heroism and the hope of identifying real-life heroes would be to ignore the reality of a world that continues to yearn for and nominate potential heroes.

The police officers and firefighters who rushed into the World Trade Center as it was in flames have been hailed as heroes. They are honoured because they sacrificed their lives to aid others. They clearly surpassed the Homeric heroes in their ability to act for the benefit of others. A Brooklyn firefighter, who refused to be named, told *Newsweek* how he and some of his colleagues arrived on the scene. "We were playing golf today on Staten Island. We saw the plane. We came over on a bus. And now they are gone."³² These men came spontaneously and out of their own volition to help others. They acted with great courage and disregard for their own safety. Victor Hanson is convinced that there "is a lesson that the heroic dead and their courageous brethren at Ground Zero can offer."³³ Plato would not have considered that these brave but foolhardy men, who certainly did not follow reason, had many positive lessons to offer. The act itself, an instinctive rush into a dangerous situation, accords with an Homeric heroic act, but as has been stressed throughout this thesis, one heroic act does not make a hero. These firefighters demonstrate the merit of an heroic deed. They may not provide complete models of emulation, nor, one

³¹ Cf. Shklar, J., *Ordinary Vices*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, London, pp.30-3, 40-1.

³² *Newsweek*, "Horror and Heroes," September 24, 2001, p.72.

³³ Hanson, "Here's to the Heroes," *op. cit.*, p.G6.

suspects, would they claim to, but they do offer the hope that in certain situations we ordinary men and women could likewise act beyond the human norm.

Sports people are frequently described in heroic terms and accorded heroic status. Sports stars do consistently act beyond the ability of normal men and women, but their superiority is limited to one endeavour. Many sports stars are found to be sadly lacking in heroic lustre when their lives are examined more fully, an examination that their celebrity status invites. Shane Warne, the Australian cricketer, has redefined the art of leg-spin bowling. Maradona's brilliance won a Football World Cup for Argentina. These two men have arguably exceeded the capacity of any other human being at a particular endeavour, yet neither man could possibly present his life of scandal and questionable moral rectitude as a model of emulation.

In the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attack, one letter writer to the *New York Times* found the adulation of sports stars too much to bear. "I am requesting that from now on, all sportswriters keep in mind the power of words and use them appropriately." She further implores the sports editor to help "redefine the word hero. It should be applied only to those who truly are – those who help others in a time of need."³⁴ The thinkers examined in this thesis help to redefine the notion of heroism so that it entails consistently acting above the human norm in a vast range of activities. Heroism, for Homer, Plato and Rousseau, is a life lived above the human norm, not an activity exercised beyond the human norm. The need to help others to qualify for heroism is a modern consideration, which is not central for the Homeric hero. The philosophical hero does help others by establishing a just *polis*. Rousseau ensures his fraternal hero will help others by linking consideration for others to self-consideration. The structures established in the *Social Contract* guarantee that a "man cannot work for others without at the same time working for himself" (*S.C.*, II, 4, 75). The firefighters' selflessness enables them to act in a manner beyond the heroic standard established by Homer, Plato or Rousseau. Yet the firefighters' heroism is based on a single deed and is, hence, limited in comparison to an heroic life.

³⁴ Nicolost, E., "Firefighter's Daughter's Plea to Redefine the Word Hero," *The New York Times*, September 30, 2001, Section 8, Column 5, p.11.

The seemingly futile dream of finding heroes persists. Some sports people do excel beyond the sports field and become more than a model of how to play the game. Cathy Freeman, who won the 400-metre sprint at the Sydney 2000 Olympics days after she had lit the cauldron to mark the start of the games, has been widely attributed heroic status both within Australia and abroad. I have chosen a female sports star to show that concepts of heroism can overcome the gender bias of Homer, Plato and Rousseau. Ross Brundrett, in defiance of those who “are pooh-poohing the hero status being accorded our conquering Olympians,” chooses to “embrace Cathy as a hero of our present and future” because “what she managed to do, how she rose above it all [the enormous wait of public pressure] was truly heroic in every sense of the word.”³⁵ The broadsheet, *The Melbourne Age*, concurred.³⁶ Michael Wilson, writing for *The Washington Post*, makes perhaps the most complete claim for heroism being accorded to Freeman. Wilson appreciates that heroism requires excellence in more than one field and argues that “Freeman, in addition to being one of the world’s great athletes, is a woman of deep thought and great intelligence whose everyday speech is almost lyrical.”³⁷ Freeman, for Wilson, has changed history by “becoming a catalyst for a reconciliation between white and indigenous Australia.” Indeed, she has become a potent symbol for positive change for an entire nation. Wilson’s Freeman is a woman of great intelligence and eloquence, a superb athlete and someone who has changed the course of history. On this account, Freeman could perhaps be the closest approximation to a hero in our midst.

Yet one cannot help but consider that Homer, Plato or Rousseau would have found Cathy Freeman somewhat under-whelming as an heroic model, irrespective of her gender. Her feats are derisory in comparison to an Achilles. Her “everyday speech,” so admired by Wilson in the *Washington Post* is not founded on a systematic application of superior human knowledge, as Plato demanded. Rousseau’s fraternity of heroes would not accept amongst their number a person who has shown no inclination to undertake a direct role in the exercise of political authority. The solitary walker would only break into a run for his own pleasure and satisfaction and would

³⁵ Brundett, R., “Our Own Stars to Admire,” *Herald Sun*, Melbourne Australia, October 6, 2000, p.20.

³⁶ *The Melbourne Age*, “Australia Takes A New Hero to Heart,” September 27, 2000, p.10.

³⁷ Wilbon, M., “Cathy Freeman’s Simple Truth,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2000, p.DO1.

certainly stay well clear of 100,000 seat stadiums. One even suspects that the letter writer to the *New York Times* would not be impressed with heroism being applied to Freeman. Freeman may well help others, but has only done so coincidentally in the manner of the Homeric heroes.

Having been excluded from a role in the *polis*, heroes are sought in peripheral fields of human endeavour. Sports stars and firefighters courageously fulfilling their professions in the face of enormous adversity hold the strongest current claims to heroism. While they perform heroic acts, they are found to be somewhat lacking as heroes.

It is the fate of the hero to be sought, but never found. A hero, by definition, serves as a model of aspiration and a model of aspiration is necessarily slightly beyond reach. A self-satisfied hero is far from inspiring. Rousseau's declaration in the *Reveries* that his life is "self-sufficient like God" rings hollow. Heroic ideals, by their very nature, must be within reach of the imagination but slightly beyond the grasp of reality. Yet heroic ideals will and must persist. Without heroism, individuals and humanity at large would have to satisfy themselves with the life of Penelope's Suitors and reject the hope of ever becoming Odysseus.

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