

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

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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

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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 *asides* 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 (*politaiia*).

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.