On the Original Meaning of Virtue and Its Contemporary Significance—Rediscovering the Spirit of Homer

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Abstract: *According to traditional categorization, the history of Western ethical thought encompasses under the name of ethics three major traditions: virtue theory, deontology, and utilitarianism. This categorization certainly has its significance. However, this paper seeks to go back to the epic age, to start from the difference of "virtue" presented by Homer and Hesiod and the different traditions opened up by them, to try to clarify the original meaning of "virtue" and its turn, and then to find out what is contained in such a way of dividing the traditions of ethics for contemporary thinking. In this way, it seeks to identify the insights into contemporary life contained in such a delineation of the ethical tradition. The paper begins with an analysis of the everyday meanings of virtue, goes back to the Hesiodic tradition of ethicalizing virtue, then to the Homeric spirit, which is distinct from the ethicalization of virtue, and finally, on the basis of the clarification of the Homeric spirit, argues for the contemporary relevance of the Homeric spirit.*

Keywords: Virtue, Hesiodic Tradition, Homeric Tradition, Ethicalization.

1. Introduction

According to the traditional categorization, in the history of Western ethical thought, the three major traditions of virtue, deontology, and utilitarianism are mainly encompassed under the name of ethics. This traditional categorization certainly has its significance, for these three major traditions, laid down by Aristotle, Kant, and Mill respectively, provide us with different perspectives and methods for thinking about ethics. But accepting the premise of such a basic categorization may raise the question of neglecting the more original meaning of virtue.

Therefore, this paper seeks to go back to the epic age and to clarify the original meaning of "virtue" and its turn, starting from the differences between the "virtues" presented by Homer and Hesiod; and, on the basis of a work accomplished, to find the basic insights for thinking about contemporary life that are contained in the ways of judging and dividing ethical thought between the Homeric and the Hesiodic traditions. On the basis of a completed work, the basic insights for thinking about contemporary life are to be found in the Homeric and Hesiodic traditions as a way of judging and dividing ethical thought.

This paper will focus on the originary meaning of virtue in four steps. First, the everyday meaning of virtue is analyzed to show the tendency to ethicize virtue in everyday language. Second, the tendency to ethicize virtue in everyday language is traced back to Hesiod and the traditions that he initiated. Thirdly, it goes back through the Hesiodic tradition to the Homeric spirit and the tradition initiated by it, which is distinct from Hesiod. Finally, on the basis of the clarification of Homeric spirituality, the rediscovery of its relevance for contemporary life is argued.

2. The Everyday Meaning of Virtue

Whether it is used positively or negatively, "virtue" has a strong tendency to be "ethicalized" in everyday language. In the contemporary context, whether one promotes or questions "virtue", one understands "virtue" in the sense that it coincides with the reality of rituals and ethical norms. Although there is a difference or even an obvious opposition between the two positions, the tendency to "ethicalize" the use of "virtue" remains consistent.

In a positive sense, the first ideas about "virtues" that we receive in basic education are, first of all, to be helpful, to be selfless, and to be kind to others, and from these principles, more specific virtues can be deduced. Although common sense morality is inevitably fragmented and unsystematic, it contains clear characteristics of affirmative virtue in the sense that the qualities and behaviors that correspond to the specific virtues derived from these principles are called "virtues". It is thus clear that "virtue", in its positive use in everyday language, has an ethical tendency and is intended to bring an individual's conduct into conformity with the ethical norms of reality; thus, voluntary sacrifices made by the individual in order to abide by the ethical norms are advocated and are accorded a morally high evaluation.

Those who are skeptical or even negative about "virtue" are not substantially different from the former in their use of the term, even though they hold a different position. In everyday discussions of virtue, one can come across the expression "moral abduction," which refers to the unreasonable constraints placed on individual freedom by a preexisting ethical norm. At this level, the basic understanding of "virtue" remains an ethical norm external to the reality of human nature, which also gives the concept of "virtue" itself an ethical tendency. In this sense, whether positively affirming "virtue" or taking a questioning or even negative stance toward "virtue," neither of them has escaped from the "ethicalization" of the understanding of "virtue. In their understanding of "virtue", neither of them has escaped the tendency of "ethicalization".

Thus, in the real context, whatever position we take between the two, it is placed on an inescapable premise, namely, an ethical understanding of "virtue". But is this the only possibility of understanding "virtue"? If not, what else is

possible? Why has the tendency to ethicalize "virtue" become the dominant conception of our present understanding of virtue? In order to answer these questions, we must go back in history and, above all, to the Hesiodic tradition that ethicized virtue.

3. The Ethicalization of Virtue and the Hesiodic Tradition

In the genealogy of the history of Western ethical thought, when we look back to the epic age, we can find a clear divergence between Homer and Hesiod. It is this divergence of position that has become the two mainstays of the history of Western ethical thought; and the history of ethical thought since then can be attributed to one or the other of the two traditions begun by Homer and Hesiod respectively.

When we look directly at the texts of Homer and Hesiod, in Homer's Iliad there is more of a sense of separation and distance, especially in the use of virtues, while in Hesiod's Work and Hours there is more of a plainness to be read, and, if we exclude the mythological elements, it becomes a moral exhortation attuned to our everyday conceptions.

It is thus clear that we are now more in the Hesiodic tradition than in the Homeric tradition, and that we have inherited more of the Hesiodic spirit in our common-sense moral concepts. The essence of this Hesiodic spirit lies in the "ethicalization" of the concept of "virtue". This can be verified in the analysis of Work and Time.

Though not strictly an "ethical" work of a polemical nature, Hesiod's Work and Hours responds to the central ethical question of how man should live. In the context of the narrative, Work and Hours begins with a review of the history of the gods and mankind to illustrate the source of the strife and misery that has made mankind what it is, and it is in this context that the main body of the work, the poet's moral exhortation to his brother, Perseus, takes place. The content of the poet's moral exhortation, regardless of its specifics, is primarily aimed at leading a righteous life, away from violence, and that leading a righteous life will lead to happiness. Thus, in Hesiod's vision, living a just life becomes the basis of virtue, which means adhering to realistic ethical norms; and, ultimately, virtue will be the path to happiness and fortune. At the end of the poem, after stating the specific ethical admonitions, the poet says, "A man who can know all these things, who does his part, who does not offend the living gods, who recognizes the forebodings of birds and avoids sinning, that man will be happy and fortunate in these days."

In conclusion, in "Work and Time" we can see Hesiod's "education for goodness" in the tone of a wise old man. In his admonition to Perseus, the poet proposes many specific norms of behavior and gives reasons for these specific norms of behavior, which are ultimately nothing more than the fact that adherence to these norms will lead to happiness and good fortune. Thus, the image of the "good man" constructed by Hesiod is one who chooses to live a righteous life, who fears the gods and abides by the law, and who can live a happy life in a harmonious and orderly city-state. The meaning of "virtue" focuses on justice, piety, law-abidingness and temperance, and is characterized by strong ethical virtues.

Hesiod's focus on the meaning of "virtue" towards ethical virtue, as embodied in Work and Time, was inherited by the ancient Greek tragedians and influenced subsequent philosophers, thus constituting the Hesiodic tradition. Euripides and Sophocles inherited the inner spirit of Hesiod in the form of tragedy, which ethicalized the virtues and emphasized the importance of ethical order. Both Euripides' masterpiece, The Phoenician Lady, and Oedipus' masterpieces, Antigone and Oedipus, become Hesiod's successors in the sense of understanding virtue in an ethical way. These tragedies are human tragedies that take place against the backdrop of Oedipus' patricide and matricide, even though Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother and stabs himself in the eyes when he learns the truth; Oedipus' two sons fight for the throne, Antigone fights against the decrees of the city-state for the sake of brotherhood, and Creon's insistence that his decrees go against the "eternal unwritten laws laid down by the gods" leads to Hemon's death. "Although there is a "fate" in tragedy, the premise that makes the tragedy come true is still the destruction of the ethical order by the parties involved. Thus, it can be seen that the writers of tragedy still emphasize the importance of the ethical order in their works, and they understand the virtues in the sense of law-abidingness, piety, justice, and the importance of the moral order. The writers of tragedy still emphasized the importance of ethical order in their works, understood virtue in the sense of law-abidingness, piety, justice, and the general happiness of life as the ultimate goal. Subsequent histories of ethics, whether classical virtue theory or modern utilitarianism and deontology, have actually used virtue in this most basic sense. Despite Kant's deontology, which sees a conflict between duty and happiness, it still sees the dispensing of happiness as conditional on lawful behavior.

In short, the way of understanding "virtue" initiated by Hesiod, inherited by the ancient Greek tragedians, and then by the philosophers, constitutes the so-called Hesiodic tradition, and has become the main way of understanding "virtue" in later times. And it is precisely this way of understanding the virtues that has become embedded in everyday language and has become the main content of common sense morality. In this tradition, while the meaning of "virtue" has been enriched throughout history under the premise of ethicalization, the idea of "virtue" has also been solidified, thus obscuring the more original meaning of virtue. Therefore, we are forced to go further back through the Hesiodic tradition; to look to Homer for another way of understanding virtue. This work not only helps to break down the persistent preconceptions we have about virtue, but it is also of great importance for contemporary life.

4. Glory, Virtue, and the Homeric Tradition

The Iliad constitutes an entirely different picture from Work and Time. If Work and Hours is a moral exhortation to free human beings from suffering in order to achieve happiness in the context of human suffering, the Iliad describes the qualities of the heroic ethic in the context of the Trojan War in the form of an epic poem. In Homer's narrative, we can see an unethical use of "virtue". Another concept closely related to "virtue" in Homer's writing is glory. Therefore, from the analysis of "glory" and "virtue" in Homer's context, we can find a more original meaning of "virtue".

On the origins of the concept of "good," Nietzsche has given an etymological account in On the Genealogy of Morals. "The judgment of 'good' does not originate with those who benefit from 'good deeds'! It actually originates from those who are 'good' themselves, that is to say, those noble, powerful, superior, and exalted people who judge themselves and their own actions to be good, that is to say, who feel and determine that they themselves and their actions are superior in opposition to all that is low, base, mediocre, and vulgar. "6 In light of this discovery by Nietzsche, the good does not initially display an ethical tendency, in conspicuous contrast to concepts such as equality and compassion. "The word 'good' was never necessary from the beginning to be associated with 'unselfish' behavior at all: that was the prejudice of moral genealogists." Nietzsche's etymological scrutiny helps us to break free from established preconceptions about goodness and virtue to understand the meaning of "virtue" in the Homeric context.

Homer also does not see virtue (arete) as an ethical virtue in the sense that we normally understand it, but rather as encompassing courage, physical strength, status, and honor. In the Iliad, virtue is used primarily to describe the heroes of the Trojan War, especially Achilles. Although from the point of view of ethical virtues, there are a lot of coldness and brutality in Achilles which are against the norms of morality, it still does not prevent him from realizing the hero's "being what he is", and achieving his own glory by killing his enemies with his courage and excellent fighting ability in the war. Therefore, the image of the "good man" portrayed by Homer is not simply a person who conforms to the order of morality, but a hero who pursues glory on the battlefield and realizes his own outstanding qualities. The emphasis on the pursuit of glory and excellence, in addition to conformity, became one of the main features that distinguished Homer from Hesiod. It is this characteristic that initiated the so-called Homeric tradition, which has been carried on in later times.

The inheritors of Homer's inner spirit have not been limited to theorists, but have included many practical men throughout history. The Athenian empire at war, as recorded by Thucydides in The Peloponnesian War, and the desire for glory and excellence in Alexander's eastern campaigns, as recorded in The Expedition of Alexander, in fact fit into the inner spirit of the heroic ethic. Although these inheritors of the Homeric spirit are tainted, conquerors and aggressors when evaluated on the scale of ethical virtue, they nevertheless strive for glory and achieve excellence in their own right, in accordance with the heroic "virtues" in the Homeric sense of the word.

By analyzing the Homeric tradition, we find a conception of "virtue" that is closely linked to the pursuit and acquisition of "glory," a way of understanding virtue that is contrary to the Hesiodic tradition and to our common-sense conception of morality, but which also has a more original meaning. This way of understanding virtue is contrary to the Hesiodic tradition and our common sense notion of morality, but it is also more original. Going back to the more original meaning of "virtue" in Homer's context is still important for our contemporary life.

5. Rediscovering the Homeric Spirit

From the analysis of the Homeric tradition, we can see the intrinsic character of Homeric spirituality. Unlike the Hesiodic tradition and the common sense conception of morality, the Homeric spirit does not unilaterally emphasize the importance of ethical virtue in the sense of conformity to the ethical order, but points to the existence of "virtue" in the sense of transcending the ethical norms of reality and pursuing glory and excellence. Such a conception of "virtue" is not a museum-like display of past conceptions. Whether for the interpretation of history and reality, or for the thinking of a good life, Homer's "virtue" has contemporary significance.

Adkins analyzes Homer's unethical conception of "virtue" in the framework of competitive and cooperative virtues. That is, Homer's values are appropriate to the society of Homer's time, and they promote those qualities that best ensure its existence. "Life is about skill and courage; they are held in the highest esteem. Wrongdoing is not appreciated by its victims; but right doing, the virtue of 'calmness,' is not so highly praised by society as a whole as skill, which is more socially desirable."8 In the midst of the competitive war-filled society in which Homer lived, society would have derived a competitive value system from its own needs, thus resulting in ethicalized virtues, i.e., moral responsibility, having no place in a competitive system. On the contrary, ethical virtues would have a place in a cooperative society. In this interpretation, Homer's conception of "virtue" is not an original meaning, but only a historical product; when the competitive society becomes a thing of the past, the corresponding conception of "virtue" will become a thing of the past as well.

But back to reality, we can still see that the ethicalized concept of "virtue" has its own limitations in interpreting reality and history, and this limitation needs to be supplemented by the concept of "virtue" in the Homeric tradition. From the analysis of both history and reality, we will see that the Homeric spirit is not merely a product of history that loses its place and value as social reality changes, but that it has an enduring significance.

First, in explaining the dynamics of history, the ethical "virtues" cannot provide an adequate explanation. When we evaluate the course of history and the great men and women who have driven it forward, if we only take an ethical stance, we will position some of the great men and women as mere misfits or aggressors, and fail to see that in the whole course of history, such individuals, full of the desire for glory and excellence, open up a new history while breaking up the old order. Hegel regards such an individual as the "world-historical individual". "If the task of the world-historical individual is to destroy the old order and to help produce a new ethical order, then it is difficult to expect that his or her behavior will show us ethical virtue. They share those cynical insights of their own generations, see the falsity of the existing ethical order, and treat it with a kind of contempt. Their passions led to the disintegration of the dying ethical world because 'they did not heed all the limitations imposed by legal power and morality'. Passion is the force that produces a new

order; it is the only force that breaks the bonds of ethical things." It is precisely by encompassing the elements of glory in the spirit of Homer that the individual world history, as well as the historical process itself, can be properly interpreted and judged. Secondly, from the point of view of the understanding of human nature, the Homeric tradition confronts the part of human nature that aspires to glory, that is, the "blood" (thumos) part of the soul, which is important not only because it cannot be simply suppressed or even eliminated by means of ethicalization as a means of achieving peace and order ; rather, it should be confronted as a means of achieving peace and order, and as a means of achieving peace and order. the way to peace and order; rather, it should be confronted and enabled to play a positive role. From Nietzsche to Rousseau's way of restraining "private love" to approach "equality" full of "self-love" and "compassion", we can see that the "nature" of "self-love" and "compassion" is not a "natural" one, but a "natural" one. In his critique of the basic position of the "state of nature" full of "self-love" and "compassion," we can see that if the desire for glory is rooted in human nature, then any repression or even elimination of it is more likely to lead not to peace and order, but to the self-splitting of the moral ideal or even to hypocrisy.10 On the contrary, if this part of the world is recognized and put to positive use, it may lead to a thriving and vibrant world, which undoubtedly has a positive meaning for the "good life".

6. Conclusion

This paper does not adopt the traditional classification of ethical traditions, but rather classifies the Homeric and Hesiodic traditions from the common sense conception of morality back to the Epic Age, using the ethicalization and unethicalization of "virtue" as the dividing line. First, we analyze the ethicalized "virtue" in the common sense conception of morality, and then we go back to the tradition of the history of ethical thought to discover how this conception fits into the Hesiodic tradition by referring to the familiar and customary use of this conception. By going back again to the Homeric epics, we find a different but more original meaning of "virtue" and the Homeric spirit that aspires to glory and excellence. Finally, based on contemporary life, from both the historical and human dimensions, Homer's affirmation of the "thumos" part of human nature is indispensable to the interpretation of history and the understanding of reality, and facing this is also positive for the "good life". It is also positive for the "good life".

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