

# Ancient Ethics

Susan Sauvé Meyer



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## ANCIENT ETHICS

To understand ethical theory we need to understand its origins, just as knowledge of ancient philosophy cannot be complete without an understanding of the ethical tradition which formed such a crucial part of it. *Ancient Ethics* is a clear and thorough introduction to the birth of ethics in ancient Greece and Rome for anyone starting out in ethics.

Here, Susan Sauvé Meyer details a history of ethical thought, from its beginnings in the writings of Plato and Aristotle through its development in the Hellenistic period by Epicureans and Stoics, with lucid and accessible explanations of their theories.

Throughout, she critically assesses the arguments on which their thoughts were based, incorporating the responses of their contemporary critics as well as modern-day assessments to show the reader how to think and critique philosophically.

This book will be ideal for anyone beginning an introductory course in ancient ethics or moral theory, anyone interested in learning more about the history of ethical philosophy, or simply those who wish to learn “how to live well”.

**Susan Suavé Meyer** is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. She specialises in Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, and has published widely on the natural and ethical philosophy of the period, including *Aristotle and Moral Responsibility* (1993).



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# ANCIENT ETHICS

A critical introduction

*Susan Sauvé Meyer*

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## PREFACE

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Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
April 2007



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We are fortunate to have today a variety of excellent translations into English of most of the central texts in the Ancient philosophical tradition. When quoting the Ancient texts in this volume, my policy has been to quote from published translations that are easily available to the reader, with preference for translations that render whole works rather than short excerpts. I am grateful for permission to quote extensively from Raphael Woolf's translation of Cicero's *De Finibus* in Julia Annas (ed.) *Cicero: On Moral Ends* (copyright © Cambridge University Press, 2001; reprinted by permission of Cambridge University Press; all rights reserved) and from the translations in Brad Inwood and Lloyd Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings*, 2nd edition (Copyright © 1997 Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson; reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.; all rights reserved).

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To my mother  
Lois Sauvé  
And to the memory of my father  
Robert Sauvé (1934–2005)

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Ac.</i>	Cicero, <i>Academica</i> (ed. Plasberg 1922)
<i>Aetius</i>	Aetius, <i>Placita Philosophorum</i> ('Views of the Philosophers') reconstructed in Diels (ed.) 1879
<i>Ap.</i>	Plato, <i>Apology</i>
<i>Att.</i>	Cicero, <i>Letters to Atticus</i> (ed. Shackleton Bailey 1987)
<i>Catg.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Categories</i>
<i>Charm.</i>	Plato, <i>Charmides</i>
<i>Comm. Not.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De Communis notitiis contra Stoicos</i> ('On common conceptions against the Stoics') (ed. Cherniss 1976)
<i>Cr.</i>	Plato, <i>Crito</i>
<i>DA</i>	Aristotle, <i>De Anima</i> ('On the soul')
<i>Deip.</i>	Athenaeus, <i>Deipnosophistai</i> (Wise sayings for Dinner) (ed. Kaibel 1887)
<i>Diss.</i>	Epictetus, <i>Discourses</i> (ed. Schenkl 1916)
<i>DL</i>	Diogenes Laertius, <i>Lives of the Philosophers</i> (ed. H. S. Long 1964)
<i>EE</i>	Aristotle, <i>Eudemian Ethics</i> (ed. Walzer and Mingay 1991)
<i>EN</i>	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> (ed. Bywater 1894).
<i>Ench.</i>	Epictetus, <i>Encheiridion</i> (Handbook) (ed. Schenkl 1916)
<i>Ep.</i>	Seneca, <i>Epistulae morales</i> (Moral Letters) (ed. Reynolds 1965)
<i>Eu.</i>	Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i>
<i>Euthd.</i>	Plato, <i>Euthydemus</i>
<i>Fin.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum</i> (On Moral Ends) (ed. Reynolds 1998)
<i>Gellius</i>	Aulus Gellius, <i>Noctes Atticae</i> (ed. Marshall 1968)
<i>Gorg.</i>	Plato, <i>Gorgias</i>
<i>H. Maj.</i>	Plato, <i>Greater Hippias</i>
<i>IG</i>	B. Inwood and L. Gerson (eds) (1997) <i>Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings</i> , Second edition. Indianapolis: Hackett
<i>Ir.</i>	Seneca, <i>De Ira</i> (On Anger) (Reynolds 1977)
<i>KD</i>	Epicurus, <i>Kuriai Doxai</i> (Principal Doctrines), DL 10.139–54

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>La.</i>	Plato, <i>Laches</i>
LS	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, <i>The Hellenistic Philosophers</i> , 2 vols, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987
Lucr.	Lucretius, <i>De Rerum Natura</i> (On the nature of things) (ed. Bailey 1947)
<i>Lys.</i>	Plato, <i>Lysis</i>
M	Sextus Empiricus, <i>Adversus Mathematicos</i> (Against the Professors) (ed. Mutschmann 1912–54, Vols II, III)
<i>Men.</i>	Epicurus, <i>Letter to Menoeceus</i> (DL 10.121–35; Usener 1887)
ND	Cicero, <i>De Natura Deorum</i> (On the Nature of the Gods) (ed. Ax 1933)
<i>Off.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Officiis</i> (On Duties) (ed. Winterbottom 1994)
PH	Sextus Empiricus, <i>Pyrrhoneae Hypotyposes</i> (Outlines of Pyrrhonism) (ed. Mutschmann 1912–54, Vol. I)
<i>Phd.</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedo</i>
<i>Phdr.</i>	Plato, <i>Phaedrus</i>
<i>Phlb.</i>	Plato, <i>Philebus</i>
<i>Phys.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Physics</i>
<i>Plac.</i>	Galen, <i>De Placitis Hippocraticis et Platonis</i> (On Hippocrates' and Plato's Doctrines) (ed. P. De Lacy, 1978–84)
<i>Pol.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
<i>Pr.</i>	Plato, <i>Protagoras</i>
PS	Cicero, <i>Paradoxa Stoicorum</i> (ed. Molager 1971)
<i>Rep.</i>	Plato, <i>Republic</i>
<i>Soph.</i>	Plato, <i>Sophist</i>
<i>St. Rep.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De Stoicorum Repugnantiis</i> (On Stoic self-refutations) (ed. Cherniss 1976)
Stob.	Stobaeus, <i>Eclogae</i> ('Selections') (Wachsmuth 1884)
<i>Strom.</i>	Clement of Alexandria, <i>Stromateis</i> ('Miscellany') (ed. Stählin 1960)
<i>Stsm.</i>	Plato, <i>Statesman</i>
SVF	J. Von Arnim, <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> (Fragments of the Older Stoics) 4 Vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1923–38)
<i>Symp.</i>	Plato, <i>Symposium</i>
TD	Cicero, <i>Tusculanae disputationes</i> (Tusculan Disputations) (ed. Dougan and Henry, 1905–34)
<i>Tht.</i>	Plato, <i>Theaetetus</i>
<i>Tim.</i>	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>
<i>Vir. Mor.</i>	Plutarch, <i>De Virtute Moral</i> (On Moral virtue) (ed. Patton <i>et al.</i> 1929)
VS	Epicurus, <i>Sententiae Vaticanae</i> (Vatican Sayings) (ed. Usener 1887)



## WHAT IS ANCIENT ETHICS?

This study offers a critical introduction to the tradition of ethical thought first articulated in the writings of the Athenian philosopher Plato (c.430–347 BCE) and developed over the next several centuries by subsequent Greek philosophers – especially Aristotle (384–322), Epicurus (341–270), the Stoic philosophers Zeno (333–264) and Chrysippus (280–207) – and by their intellectual heirs in the Roman empire – most notably Seneca (4 BCE–65 CE) and Epictetus (50–130 CE).

‘Ethics’ in this context does not simply mean the particular codes of conduct or systems of values adhered to or espoused by Greeks and Romans.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it is a type of reflective and systematic *inquiry* into questions of conduct and value that Plato presents as a distinctively philosophical enterprise. Just what makes the inquiry philosophical will emerge over the succeeding chapters. What makes it ethical is its focus on the ultimate practical question, ‘How should we live?’, as well as on the closely related but no less practical question, ‘How do we become good?’. At the hands of Plato and his intellectual successors, inquiry into these very practical questions requires, in addition, investigation of theoretical issues such as the nature of the good, the route to and limits of our knowledge of it, as well as the structure and nature of the human psyche.

Anyone who has struggled with the problem of how to live a good and worthwhile human life will be familiar with the concerns that motivate the ancient ethical tradition. The manner in which that tradition addresses these concerns, however, may be unfamiliar or off-putting to readers today. Even though philosophical ethics today has roots in the ancient world, it is also shaped by an additional two thousand years of religious, philosophical, and historical development. We think about ethical questions from a vantage point quite removed from that of the ancients. My goal in this study is to provide the reader with an understanding of the ancient ethical tradition in its own terms, and in consequence, an appreciation of the extent to which its projects and presuppositions overlap with or differ from those of present-day ethical thinking.

My intended audience is students and scholars of ethics or classical philosophy who seek an entry point into the field of ancient ethics, as well as the general reader who is not averse to sustained argumentation. The introduction I offer here is, like its subject matter, philosophical. My aim is not simply to describe the ethical philosophies of the ancient world, but to consider the arguments with which they were supported by their proponents as well as the criticisms that they encountered from their contemporaries. I consider also some questions and objections raised by later readers, including those of the present day; however, my focus is on the issues in the ancient debate. A proper understanding of the project of ethical inquiry as the ancients themselves conceived it should resolve at least some of the perplexity modern readers encounter when studying their texts. It may also show, at least in some cases, that the questions we bring to the ancient ethical texts are not ones we are likely to find answered there.

The ancient ethical tradition, we will see, is far from homogeneous and undergoes considerable development over many centuries. The present study therefore faces the challenge of providing sufficiently detailed coverage to meet its goals while still keeping to the moderate length that best serves the interests of its intended audience. Accordingly I have restricted my focus to the four major philosophies and schools that arose during the Classical and Hellenistic periods: those of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics. I omit the ethics of the Pyrrhonist school, whose main development (even if not its inspiration) is post-Hellenistic.<sup>2</sup> Within the targeted time period I also omit systematic treatment of some of the smaller schools – in particular, the Cynics and Cyrenaics – discussing these only in relation to the Stoics (heirs of Cynicism) and the Epicureans (rivals to the Cyrenaics). Nor do I discuss the Hellenistic development of Plato's and Aristotle's schools, except insofar as they engaged in disputes with their Epicurean and Stoic contemporaries.

Recent decades have seen a surge of scholarly interest in the ancient ethical tradition. A huge body of valuable scholarship in many languages has deepened and broadened our understanding of virtually every aspect of the ancient ethical tradition; yet, we still lack a comprehensive account of that tradition as a whole.<sup>3</sup> The present volume is a modest contribution towards filling that gap. Since there is still considerable disagreement among scholars about many important issues, this volume is not a textbook of received scholarly opinion, but a contribution to the ongoing interpretive project. In presenting a connected account of the development of ethical philosophy over the five centuries of this study, I have had to take a stand on many disputed issues, and have been led by my assessment of the 'lie of the land' to adopt unorthodox positions on others. In the interests of readers who are looking for an entry point into the vast literature on the subject, rather than a detailed foray into the complexities of the disputed terrain, I have not defended my individual interpretative decisions in detail

against rival alternatives. Instead, my strategy has been to cite as fully as possible the primary ancient texts bearing on the question at issue, and to use the footnotes and bibliography to point the reader towards the range of scholarly opinion (with an emphasis on publications that are relatively recent and in English). I also hope that my various interpretive stands derive at least indirect support from the coherence and plausibility of the connected picture of the ancient ethical tradition to which they contribute.

### An ethics of virtue?

The two central notions invoked in ancient ethical theory are those of *aretê* (excellence, or virtue) and *eudaimonia* (happiness, or the good life). It is common these days to refer to the ancient ethical tradition as an ‘ethics of virtue’. The succeeding chapters, however, will reveal less homogeneity within the tradition than this categorization would seem to imply, and indeed a closer connection between the notions of *aretê* and *eudaimonia* than is usually recognized in contemporary philosophical scholarship.

We shall see that the ‘virtue’ pursued by the ambitious young Greeks portrayed in Plato’s dialogues is not the excellent moral psychology (or state of character) that goes by that name in contemporary virtue ethics. It amounts, roughly, to success in life, where such success is measured largely if not entirely in external terms – in the extent to which one has acquired the typically recognized good things in life: wealth, power, friends and the like. On this pre-philosophical understanding of *aretê*, there is little difference between excellence (*aretê*) and happiness (*eudaimonia*). To quest for one is to quest for the other.

It is largely as a result of the philosophical theorizing of Plato and Aristotle that *aretê* is internalized and redefined as a state of character. This theoretical reorientation of the notion of *aretê* opens up conceptual space between ‘virtue’ (the goodness of a person) and the success in life that is captured by the label ‘*eudaimonia*’ (happiness). However, I shall argue, this ‘space’ is not recognized or at any rate explored by either Plato or Aristotle. So great is the pull of the pre-philosophical considerations that identify the life of excellence with the happy life that it is not until the Hellenistic period that philosophers clearly formulate and debate the question of whether a person living a virtuous life might still fail to be happy.<sup>4</sup> Even then the affirmative answer is the minority opinion, held by Aristotle’s Hellenistic successors. Both the Stoics and Epicureans conceive of the virtuous life as necessarily happy. If their reasons for doing so are unconvincing to modern readers this is at least partly due to the fact that we moderns lack access to the considerations that make such conclusions attractive.

While the internalized conception of virtue as a state of character is adopted by all the philosophers in our study, it is still misleading to



characterize their ethical philosophies generically as an ‘ethics of virtue’ – at least to the extent that this designation attributes a central explanatory role in their theories to the notion of a virtuous state of character. At best, this characterization is true of Plato and, to a certain extent, Aristotle. But even Aristotle subordinates the virtues of character to the virtues of intellect – hence his notorious claim that the best life is the life of reflection (*theoria*) disengaged from all practical concerns.

‘Virtue ethics’ is even less apt as a characterization of Epicurean ethical philosophy. As a critic quips, one is hard pressed to find an Epicurean talking about virtue – except in fighting a rearguard action against critics.<sup>5</sup> On the Epicurean view, the virtues are only instrumentally valuable – hardly an ethical theory that takes virtue of character to be a fundamental notion. The Stoics, by contrast, do take virtuous activity to be valuable for its own sake. Even so, the central notion of their ethics is not virtue as a state of character, but rather virtuous activity – where such activity is conceived not as an expression of human psychology, but as an assimilation to cosmic nature. For both Stoics and Epicureans the fundamental explanatory notion in ethics is that of *eudaimonia*, which they understand according to Aristotle’s clarification as the ‘goal of life’. The Stoics and Epicureans are ‘eudaimonists’ rather than virtue theorists.

### A morality of happiness?

The common feature of ancient ethical theory (to the extent that there is one) is its assumption that happiness (*eudaimonia*) is our goal in life, and its organization around the question, what is happiness (*eudaimonia*)? Ancient ethics is an ethic of *eudaimonia* – or, as Julia Annas has aptly characterized it, a ‘morality of happiness’ (Annas 1993). The term ‘morality’ comes to us via the Latin translation of the Greek term from which we get the English term ‘ethics’; yet, there are those today who balk at identifying the project of ancient Greek ethics with that of morality.<sup>6</sup> Morality, on such a view, is intrinsically bound up with conditions of autonomy and motivation that are either inconsistent with or absent from the conception of human agency delivered by the eudaimonist tradition. The assumption, within that tradition, that every action is ‘for the sake of happiness’ is taken to imply a self-interested motivation inconsistent with genuinely moral motivation, and the emphasis (at least in Plato and Aristotle) on the social conditions necessary for forming a virtuous character is taken to preclude the autonomy that in the modern tradition is the hallmark of moral agency. We shall see, however, that autonomy is a very important feature of the ethics in the ancient tradition (especially for the Stoics, but with roots going back as far as Plato), and that the motive of the virtuous agent is no more self-interested than the modern conception of properly ‘moral’ motivation.

Such a promissory note can only be fulfilled by a detailed examination of the ancient tradition itself. So let us now turn to that task.

### Notes

- 1 Greek 'ethics' in this sense is well described in Dover 1974, den Boer 1979, Bryant 1996, and Carter 1986: chapter 1. On Roman ethical attitudes, see Kaster 2005 and Earl 1967. The *Memorable Doings and Sayings* by the Roman Valerius Maximus (translated into English in Shackleton Bailey 2000) is a compendium of examples illustrative of Roman ethical standards. On the Roman genre of *exempla*, see Roller 2004. Thanks to James Ker for assistance on this point.
- 2 The figurehead of Pyrrhonism is Pyrrho of Elis, a shadowy figure of the fourth or third centuries BCE about whom little is known. Early in the first century BCE 'Pyrrhonism' was reportedly revived by the skeptical philosopher Aenesidemus of Cnossus; however, the philosophical school seems to have had little impact during the Hellenistic period. Only in the writings of Sextus Empiricus, two centuries later, do we have any extended discussion of Pyrrhonism as an ethical philosophy. On Pyrrhonist ethics, see Bett 1997.
- 3 Julia Annas's magisterial study *The Morality of Happiness* (Annas 1993), which is organized thematically rather than historically and omits a discussion of Plato, is not intended to present such a history. Prior 1991 is highly selective, giving only a cursory treatment of philosophers later than Aristotle, and discussing only one text of Plato.
- 4 While Aristotle is clearly familiar with and takes a stand on the issue of whether a person who lacks the external goods can live a happy life, we shall see that this a different issue from whether a virtuous life might fail to be a happy one.
- 5 Cicero, *Fin.* 2.51.
- 6 For statements of the distinction between ethics and morality, see Williams 1985 and MacIntyre 1984. For further discussion of the relation between ancient and modern ethics or morality, see Striker 1988, Annas 1995, Broadie 2006, and Kraut 2006a.

## PLATO AND THE PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

### Plato and his predecessors

We begin our study with Plato, but this is not because Plato's predecessors failed to address ethical questions. Indeed, Plato and his contemporaries inherited a rich literary tradition in which poets such as Homer and Hesiod (eighth and ninth centuries BCE), Archilochos and Solon in the seventh century, Simonides in the sixth and Pindar in the fifth, as well as tragedians such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in the fifth century, articulate ethical ideals and attitudes.<sup>1</sup> An educated person would learn many such poems by heart, thereby internalizing the ethical attitudes they expressed.<sup>2</sup> As a character in Plato's *Republic* says, it is from the poets that one gathers 'an impression of what sort of person he should be and of how best to travel the road of life' (*Rep.* 365a–b). That is, the poets offer answers to the central questions in Greek ethical inquiry. Ethical inquiry of the sort that this study concerns, however, consists not just in consulting traditional authorities for ethical advice, but in subjecting those answers to critical scrutiny by considering and evaluating the reasons that can be offered in their support.

Greek city states during the fifth century BCE saw a great rise of interest in the use of reason as a critical tool and an instrument of argumentation and persuasion, especially as applied to ethical questions. Relish for the give and take of argument, either as a participant or a spectator, was a feature of popular culture.<sup>3</sup> Itinerant intellectuals (known as 'sophists', *sophistai*) such as Protagoras, Hippias and Prodicus – as well as teachers of rhetoric such as Gorgias – wrote and lectured on ethical subjects. They attracted large followings among ambitious young men who wished to become persuasive speakers.<sup>4</sup> The Athenian Socrates (470–399 BCE) was among those who had a reputation for being a clever speaker (*Ap.* 17a–b), and he too attracted a significant following among Athenian youth (*Ap.* 23c, 33d–34a; *Pbd.* 59a–c). These included Plato and a number of others who like him later wrote dialogues in which Socrates is the main speaker.

The ‘sophists’ were viewed with considerable suspicion and hostility by more conservative members of society, who feared that the verbal techniques and logical pyrotechnics they taught undermined traditional ethical values, and thus ‘corrupted’ the youth.<sup>5</sup> Among his contemporaries, Socrates was generally perceived to be just another sophist. In fact, he was eventually charged with corrupting the youth, tried and convicted by an Athenian jury, then executed. Plato goes to great lengths in his dialogues to defend Socrates against the charge of corruption, and to distinguish Socrates’ brand of inquiry and argumentation, which he labels ‘philosophy’, from those of the other so-called sophists.<sup>6</sup> Indeed it is largely due to Plato’s success in this endeavour that the term ‘sophist’ came to have pejorative connotations, reflected in the English word, ‘sophistical’.<sup>7</sup>

The sophists, Socrates, and the poetic tradition thus provide the background and context for Plato’s ethical writings. However, even if we begin our study of ancient ethics with Plato, we will not be neglecting that context, because the context is itself preserved and set up for examination in Plato’s dialogues. The poets are regularly quoted and discussed, the major sophists and teachers of rhetoric, along with their devotees, appear as characters, and Socrates is the dominant speaker in all but a few of the dialogues. Plato portrays his teacher as interrogating sophists and orators, along with well-known Athenian public figures from the fifth century.<sup>8</sup>

These dialogues are not accurate reports of conversations between Socrates and the characters depicted. Rather, they are dramatic creations in which Plato uses the figure of Socrates to work through the ethical issues of the day. Indeed, in certain cases it is historically impossible or highly improbable for such conversations to have taken place.<sup>9</sup> The extent to which the views articulated by Plato’s Socrates are faithful to the philosophy of the historical Socrates is another matter, and a disputed one.<sup>10</sup> There is little in the way of corroborating evidence, since Socrates himself wrote nothing, and what little remains of the ‘Socratic dialogues’ written by others shows considerable variation in the doctrines and personality attributed to Socrates.<sup>11</sup> The Socratic dialogues of Plato, Aeschines, and Antisthenes and the teachings of the Socratic Aristippus inspired such different ethical traditions that, in later Greek philosophy, Socrates is revered as a figurehead by schools that espouse rival doctrines.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of their historical accuracy, however, Plato’s dialogues were influential in shaping much of that later conception of Socrates, so we have good reason and no better alternative than to begin our study with Plato.

The fact that Plato writes dialogues rather than treatises makes identifying his own views a rather delicate matter – delicate, but not impossible. One cannot assume, of course, that the message intended by Plato in a given dialogue corresponds simply to whatever is said by Socrates (or by the dominant speaker) in that dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, this is often a large part of Plato’s message – especially in less dramatic dialogues, such as

books II–X of the *Republic*, for example, and much of the *Laws*. In these works, Socrates or the dominant speaker holds forth at length, while other characters have barely more than walk-on parts. The dialogue form, however, allows Plato many additional means of making a point. For example, even if the character Socrates is stumped by a puzzle and gives up the inquiry in bewilderment, the course of the dialogue may point the way to a solution to which Plato is directing his readers. In addition, Plato's choice and characterization of interlocutors, the relation between them, sometimes even their order of appearance, along with the historical setting and dramatic structure, can each communicate significant messages to his intended audience, and Plato is a master at controlling these variables.

### The quest for excellence

Regardless of the interpretive difficulties posed by Plato's choice of genre, his masterful use of the dialogue form has its corresponding benefits. Highly dramatic dialogues such as *Laches*, *Meno*, *Protagoras*, and *Gorgias* bring brilliantly to life the urgent practical enterprise that sets the context for Plato's ethical philosophy. We may call this 'the quest for excellence (*aretê*)'. These works abound with characters who seek excellence for themselves or for their children, volunteer advice as to how it is to be acquired, or offer to teach it for a fee.

The dialogue *Protagoras* opens in the hours before dawn. Socrates, asleep in his bed, is awakened by Hippocrates. The excited youth begs to be taken to the house where Protagoras, the sophist, has just arrived for a visit. He wants Socrates to convince the famous sophist to take him on as a pupil. Hippocrates is so eager to study with Protagoras that he is willing to bankrupt his family and friends in order to pay the sophist's fees (*Pr.* 310e). What will he learn from Protagoras? Excellence, Protagoras promises (318a–319a). Another ambitious seeker after excellence is Meno, the title character in another dialogue. The young Thessalian has elected to apprentice himself to the orator Gorgias in order to achieve this goal (*Meno* 71c–d, 76c, 91a, 92d). Callicles in the dialogue *Gorgias* is like-minded. The dialogue *Laches* opens as two elderly fathers, Lysimachus and Melesias, ashamed about not having lived up to the reputations of their illustrious fathers, seek advice about how to educate their sons to achieve their grandfathers' excellence (*La.* 179c–180a).<sup>14</sup> In the *Euthydemus*, Crito is preoccupied with the question of whom he should hire to educate (*paideuein*) his son Critoboulus (*Euthd.* 306d–307a).<sup>15</sup>

These dialogues are thickly populated as well with a cast of characters who offer to teach excellence, for a fee, to those who seek it.<sup>16</sup> These self-styled educators include historical figures such as Protagoras, Prodicus, Hippias and the lesser known Euvenus of Paros (*Ap.* 19e–20a, *Pr.* 314e–316a, *H. Maj.* 283c–284b; cf. *Gorg.* 519e) along with Euthydemus and

Dionysodorus in the dialogue *Euthydemus* (306e). The sophists' claim to be teachers of excellence is considered effrontery by conservatives like Anytus, who champion the traditional view that one learns excellence by associating with worthy fellow citizens.<sup>17</sup> The famous orator Gorgias seeks to avoid the hostility directed at the sophists by insisting that he teaches his pupils only rhetorical skill (*Gorg.* 456a–457c). But he too is popularly seen as a sophist,<sup>18</sup> and in any case, the seekers after excellence flock to him in the expectation that they will acquire what even Gorgias advertises as the greatest power known to men (*Gorg.* 451d; cf. 466b).

In sum, these dialogues portray a cultural and intellectual climate in which people agree that it is extremely important to acquire excellence, but disagree about how it is to be acquired: hence the debating question that opens the *Meno*:<sup>19</sup>

Can you tell me, Socrates, can virtue be taught? Or is it not teachable but the results of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?

(*Meno* 70a)<sup>20</sup>

In seeking excellence for themselves or their loved ones, these characters in Plato's dialogues are pursuing a thoroughly traditional goal – with a pedigree at least as old as the Homeric poems. Plato's dominant speaker in *Laws* refers to the ambitious seekers of excellence as 'those who seek to become the best (*aristous*) as quickly as possible' (*Laws* IV 718d7–e1)<sup>21</sup> – a clear echo of the Homeric ideal articulated in the *Iliad* by the aged Peleus, who urges his son Achilles to 'always be the best (*aristeuein*) and prevail over others' (Homer, *Iliad* 11.783; cf. 6.206–10).

This is not to say that the conception of excellence has remained static in the centuries between the time of Homer and that of Plato. The excellence glorified in Homer is that of the warrior chieftain whose greatness consists in his fame (*kleos*) and prowess in battle, is proportional to the number of people he rules, and is measured by the property he has accumulated as a result of his dominance (*Iliad* 1.225–284). The social context in which Socrates' interlocutors seek excellence is, however, not the Bronze Age battlefield where warriors clash, but the fifth-century *polis* (city state). The excellence sought in the latter context is 'the human and political (*politikê*) kind' (*Ap.* 20b4–5).<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, Protagoras claims that he instructs his students in 'the political craft' (*politikê technê*, *Pr.* 319a4; cf. *Euthd.* 291b–c).

The 'political craft' encompasses both the art of the citizen (*politês*, *Pr.* 319a5), as well as that of the political leader or statesman (*politikos*). The art of the citizen consists in doing one's share in the cooperative project of the *polis*, and taking no more than one's share of the benefits; thus good citizenship requires justice and self-restraint (*Pr.* 322b–323a; *Rep.* 352c).<sup>23</sup>

Good citizenship, however, is hardly all that the ambitious seekers after *aretê* hope to achieve. The political excellence that the elderly fathers in the *Laches* wish to inculcate in their sons is displayed, they think, by eminent statesmen like their own fathers, Aristides and Thucydides. They want their sons not merely to be just and temperate, but to emulate the accomplishments of their grandfathers, who achieved ‘a great many fine things . . . both in war and in peace in their management of the affairs both of their allies and of the city’ (*La.* 179c). The fathers’ worry is not that their sons will turn out to be anti-social pariahs, but that they will be undistinguished (*akleis*, 179d4) in the management of public affairs. So too the excellence of interest to the ambitious Meno concerns ‘taking care of public business’ or ‘managing a city’ (*Meno* 71e; cf. 91a), and this too Protagoras promises to teach the young Hippocrates:

What I teach is sound deliberation, both in domestic matters – how best to manage one’s household, and in public affairs – how to realize one’s maximum potential for success in political debate and action.

(*Protagoras* 318e5–319a2)

The Homeric ideal of excellence, which glorifies competition and dominance, sits rather uncomfortably with the ideal of political excellence – in particular with the ideal of the good citizen, whose justice and self-restraint are in sharp contrast to the aggressive self-aggrandizement of the Homeric hero (G. 483d–e).<sup>24</sup> The Homeric picture, however, still exerts a strong pull on the imaginations of the ambitious seekers after excellence depicted by Plato. These tend to find attractive the preeminence and dominance that come with political leadership. They are eager to exercise power over others and less interested, if at all, in living up to the demands of justice and self-restraint. Hence temperance and justice are deliberately omitted from Calicles’ list of the qualities of the ‘superior person’ (G. 491b–d), and Socrates makes a point of adding them to Meno’s conception of excellence (*Meno* 73a), and then has to remind him to add them again at 78c–e.

One of Plato’s projects in his dialogues is to address the tensions between the Homeric and the political conception of excellence, and to defend an account of political excellence that applies to private citizen and ruler alike. As the Athenian says in the *Laws*, the ‘complete citizen . . . knows how to rule and be ruled with justice’ (643e6), and one must first learn how to be ruled before one takes on rule (762e). This larger project of Plato is one of the reasons why Socrates typically responds, to those who ask how they might acquire excellence, that they must first think carefully about what excellence is. Thus in the *Meno*, the opening question, Can excellence be taught?, is quickly succeeded by the more fundamental question insisted upon by Socrates: What is excellence?

This question informs all of Plato's ethical writing – so let us be sure we understand what it means.

### Excellence, virtue, and happiness

The word that I have been translating as 'excellence' (*aretê*) is often, and quite properly, translated as 'virtue'.<sup>25</sup> This rendering can, however, give a misleading impression of the question to which Plato's Socrates urges his interlocutors' attention. First of all, as it is used in English today, 'virtue' tends to refer to a character trait – a feature of a person's psychology. That this is so, however, is partly the intellectual legacy of Plato and Aristotle, at whose hands *aretê* comes to be defined as just such an internal phenomenon: 'the condition of one's soul' (*Rep.* 444d13–e2; cf. *Ap.* 29e).<sup>26</sup> This definition, however, is a theoretical refinement of the notion of *aretê* understood by Socrates' interlocutors.

*Aretê*, as Plato's and Socrates' contemporaries understand it, can certainly apply to such recognizable virtues as courage, wisdom, self-restraint (*sôphrosunê*), and justice (although the last two are controversial for those attracted to the Homeric ideal). We regularly find these four virtues listed as the four 'kinds of *aretê*' in Plato (e.g. *Meno* 74a, *Pr.* 329d–330a, *La.* 198a, *Rep.* 428a, *Laws* 963a–964b). Socrates' interlocutors, however, are more likely to understand courage, self-restraint and justice as patterns of behaviour than they are to conceive of them as psychological conditions.<sup>27</sup> Indeed it takes some coaching (*La.* 191e–192b) for Socrates to get Laches to agree that virtue is a 'power' (*dunamis* 192b6) of the soul. In any case, these interlocutors clearly understand *aretê* to encompass many things other than the cardinal virtues. Such things as noble birth, bodily strength, good looks, social status, wealth, and success in competition are generally considered by Greeks of Plato's day to be very important aspects of *aretê*.<sup>28</sup> These can in no way be understood as psychological traits. Thus Meno answers Socrates' question, 'What is *aretê*?', with the proposal that *aretê* is 'ruling others' (*Meno* 73d) or 'acquiring gold and silver' (78c6–7). However unimpressive these proposals may be as ideals of human excellence, it is clear that Meno does not take *aretê* to be a state of character. Similarly, the disappointed sons of Aristides and Thucydides who want their own sons to achieve the *aretê* of their illustrious grandfathers have in mind not the characters of these famous statesmen, but their great accomplishments.

Those whom Plato depicts as questing for excellence are primarily interested in improving not their characters but their lives. As a result, the natural way for them to understand Socrates' question, 'What is excellence?' is as a normative issue about how one should live, rather than a psychological issue about states of character. This normative question is a central motif in dialogues such as the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, which attempt to resolve the competing claims of the life that looks good by



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