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The Virtues in Heroic Societies

In all those cultures, Greek, medieval or Renaissance, where moral thinking and action is structured according to some version of the scheme that I have called classical, the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories. Where Christianity or Judaism or Islam have prevailed, biblical stories are as important as any other; and each culture of course has stories that are peculiarly its own; but every one of these cultures, Greek or Christian, also possesses a stock of stories which derive from and tell about its own vanished heroic age. In sixth-century Athens the formal recitation of the Homeric poems was established as a public ceremony; the poems themselves were substantially composed no later than the seventh-century, but they speak of a very much earlier time even than that. In thirteenth-century Christian Iceland men wrote sagas about the events of the hundred years after A.D. 930, the period immediately before and immediately after the first coming of Christianity, when the old religion of the Norsemen still flourished. In the twelfth century in the monastery of Clonmacnoise Irish monks wrote down in the *Lebor na hUidre* stories of Ulster heroes, some of whose language enables scholars to date them back to the eighth century, but whose plots are situated centuries before that in an era when Ireland was still pagan. Exactly the same kind of scholarly controversy has flourished in each case over the question of how far, if at all, the Homeric poems or the Sagas or the stories of the Ulster cycle, such as the *Tain Bó Cuailnge*, provide us with reliable historical evidence about the societies which they portray. Happily I need not involve myself with the detail of those arguments. What matters for my own argument is a relatively indisputable historical fact, namely that such narratives did provide the historical memory, adequate or inadequate, of the societies in which they were finally written down. More than that they provided a moral background to contemporary debate in classical societies, an account of a now-transcended or partly-transcended moral order whose beliefs and concepts were still partially influential, but which also provided an illuminating contrast to the present. The understanding of heroic society—whether it ever existed or not—is thus a necessary part of the understanding of classical society and of its successors. What are its key features?

M.I. Finley has written of Homeric society: 'The basic values of society were given, predetermined and so were a man's place in the society and the privileges and duties that followed from his status' (Finley 1954, p. 134). What Finley says of Homeric society is equally true of other forms of heroic society in Iceland or in Ireland. Every individual has a given role and status within a well-defined and highly determinate system of roles and statuses. The key structures are those of kinship and of the household. In such a society a man knows who he is by knowing his role in these structures; and in knowing this he knows also what he owes and what is owed to him by the occupant of every other role and status. In Greek (*dein*) and in Anglo-Saxon (*ahte*) alike, there is originally no clear distinction between 'ought' and 'owe'; in Icelandic the word 'skyldr' ties together 'ought' and 'is kin to'.

But it is not just that there is for each status a prescribed set of duties and privileges. There is also a clear understanding of what actions are required to perform these and what actions fall short of what is required. For what are required are actions. A man in heroic society is what he does. Hermann Fränkel wrote of Homeric man that 'a man and his actions become identical, and he makes himself completely and adequately comprehended in them; he has no hidden depths. . . . In [the epics] factual report of what men do and say, everything that men are, is expressed, because they are no more than what they do and say and suffer' (Fränkel 1975, p. 79). To judge a man therefore is to judge his actions. By performing actions of a particular kind in a particular situation a man gives warrant for judgment upon his virtues and vices; for the virtues just are those qualities which sustain a free man in his role and which manifest themselves in those actions which his role requires. And what Fränkel says and suggests about Homeric man holds also of man in other heroic portrayals.

The word *aretê*, which later comes to be translated as 'virtue', is in the Homeric poems used for excellence of any kind; a fast runner displays the *aretê* of his feet (*Iliad* 20. 411) and a son excels his father in every kind of *aretê*—as athlete, as soldier and in mind (*Iliad* 15. 642). This concept of virtue or excellence is more alien to us than we are apt at first to recognize. It is not difficult for us to recognize the central place that strength will have in such a conception of human excellence or the way in which courage will be one of the central virtues, perhaps the central virtue. What is alien to our conception of virtue is the intimate connection in heroic society between the concept of courage and its allied virtues on the one hand and the concepts of friendship, fate and death on the other.

Courage is important, not simply as a quality of individuals, but as the quality necessary to sustain a household and a community. *Kûdos*, glory, belongs to the individual who excels in battle or in contest as a mark of recognition by his household and his community. Other qualities linked to courage also merit public recognition because of the part they play in sustaining the public order. In the Homeric poems cunning is such a quality because cunning may have its achievements where courage is lacking or courage fails. In the Icelandic sagas a wry sense of humor is closely bound up with courage. In the saga account of the battle of Clontarf in 1014, where Brian Boru defeated a Viking army, one of the norsemen, Thorstein, did not flee when the rest of his army broke and ran, but remained where he was, tying his shoestring. An Irish leader, Kerthialfad, asked him why he was not running. 'I couldn't get home tonight,' said Thorstein. 'I live in Iceland.' Because of the joke, Kerthialfad spared his life.

To be courageous is to be someone on whom reliance can be placed. Hence courage is an important ingredient in friendship. The bonds of friendship in heroic societies are modelled on those of kinship. Sometimes friendship is formally vowed, so that by the vow the duties of brothers are mutually incurred. Who my friends are and who my enemies, is as clearly defined as who my kinsmen are. The other ingredient of friendship is fidelity. My friend's courage assures me of his power to aid me and my household; my friend's fidelity assures me of his will. My household's fidelity is the basic guarantee of its unity. So in women, who constitute the crucial relationships within the household, fidelity is the key virtue. Andromache and Hector, Penelope and Odysseus are friends (*philos*) as much as are Achilles and Patroclus.

What I hope this account makes clear already is the way in which any adequate account of the virtues in heroic society would be impossible which divorced them from their context in its social structure, just as no adequate account of the social structure of heroic society would be possible which did not include an account of the heroic virtues. But to put it in this way is to understate the crucial point: morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. There is only one set of social bonds. Morality as something distinct does not yet exist. Evaluative questions *are* questions of social fact. It is for this reason that Homer speaks always of *knowledge* of what to do and how to judge. Nor are such questions difficult to answer, except in exceptional cases. For the given rules which assign men their place in the social order and with it their identity also prescribe what they owe and what is owed to them and how they are to be treated and regarded if they fail and how they are to treat and regard others if those others fail.

Without such a place in the social order, a man would not only be in-

capable of receiving recognition and response from others; not only would others not know, but he would not himself know who he was. It is precisely because of this that heroic societies commonly have a well-defined status to which any stranger who arrives in the society from outside can be assigned. In Greek the word for 'alien' and the word for 'guest' are the same word. A stranger has to be received with hospitality, limited but well-defined. When Odysseus encounters the Cyclopes the question as to whether they possess *themis* (the Homeric concept of *themis* is the concept of customary law shared by all civilized peoples) is to be answered by discovering how they treat strangers. In fact they eat them—that is, for them strangers have no recognized human identity.

We might thus expect to find in heroic societies an emphasis upon the contrast between the expectations of the man who not only possesses courage and its allied virtues, but who also has kinsmen and friends on the one hand and the man lacking all these on the other. Yet one central theme of heroic societies is also that death waits for both alike. Life is fragile, men are vulnerable and it is of the essence of the human situation that they are such. For in heroic societies life is the standard of value. If someone kills you, my friend or brother, I owe you their death and when I have paid my debt to you their friend or brother owes them my death. The more extended my system of kinsmen and friends, the more liabilities I shall incur of a kind that may end in my death.

Moreover there are powers in the world which no one can control. Human life is invaded by passions which appear sometimes as impersonal forces, sometimes as gods. Achilles' wrath disrupts Achilles as well as his relationship to the other Greeks. These forces and the rules of kinship and friendship together constitute patterns of an ineluctable kind. Neither willing nor cunning will enable anyone to evade them. Fate is a social reality and the descrying of fate an important social role. It is no accident that the prophet or the seer flourishes equally in Homeric Greece, in saga Iceland and in pagan Ireland.

The man therefore who does what he ought moves steadily towards his fate and his death. It is defeat and not victory that lies at the end. To understand this is itself a virtue; indeed it is a necessary part of courage to understand this. But what is involved in such understanding? What would have been understood if the connections between courage, friendship, fidelity, the household, fate and death had been grasped? Surely that human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story. It is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and sagas capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate.

'What is character but the determination of incident?' wrote Henry James. 'What is incident but the illustration of character?' But in heroic society character of the relevant kind can only be exhibited in a succession of incidents and the succesion itself must exemplify certain patterns. Where heroic society agrees with James is that character and incident cannot be characterized independently of each other. So to understand courage as a virtue is not just to understand how it may be exhibited in character, but also what place it can have in a certain kind of enacted story. For courage in heroic society is a capacity not just to face particular harms and dangers but to face a particular kind of pattern of harms and dangers, a pattern in which individual lives find their place and which such lives in turn exemplify.

What epic and saga then portray is a society which already embodies the form of epic or saga. Its poetry articulates its form in individual and social life. To say this is still to leave open the question of whether there ever were such societies; but it does suggest that if there were such societies they could only be adequately understood through their poetry. Yet epic and saga are certainly not simple mirror images of the society they profess to portray. For it is quite clear that the poet or the saga writer claims for himself a kind of understanding which is denied to the characters about whom he writes. The poet does not suffer from the limitations which define the essential condition of his characters. Consider especially the *Iliad*.

As I said earlier of heroic society in general, the heroes in the *Iliad* do not find it difficult to know what they owe one another; they feel *aidôs*—a proper sense of shame—when confronted with the possibility of wrongdoing, and if that is not sufficient, other people are always at hand to drive home the accepted view. Honor is conferred by one's peers and without honor a man is without worth. There is indeed in the vocabulary available to Homer's characters no way for them to view their own culture and society as if from the outside. The evaluative expressions which they employ are mutually interdefined and each has to be explained in terms of the others.

Let me use a dangerous, but illuminating analogy. The rules which govern both action and evaluative judgment in the *Iliad* resemble the rules and the precepts of a game such as chess. It is a question of fact whether a man is a good chess player, whether he is good at devising end-game strategies, whether a move is the right move to make in a particular situation. The game of chess presupposes, indeed is partially constituted by, agreement on how to play chess. Within the vocabulary of chess it makes no sense to say 'That was the one and only move which would achieve checkmate, but was it the right move to make?' And therefore someone

who said this and understood what he was saying would have to be employing some notion of 'right' which receives its definition from outside chess, as someone might ask this whose purpose in playing chess was to amuse a small child rather than to win.

One reason why the analogy is dangerous is that we do play games such as chess for a variety of purposes. But there is nothing to be made of the question: for what purpose do the characters in the *Iliad* observe the rules that they observe and honor the precepts which they honor? It is rather the case that it is only within their framework of rules and precepts that they are able to frame purposes at all; and just because of this the analogy breaks down in another way, too. All questions of choice arise within the framework; the framework itself therefore cannot be chosen.

There is thus the sharpest of contrasts between the emotivist self of modernity and the self of the heroic age. The self of the heroic age lacks precisely that characteristic which we have already seen that some modern moral philosophers take to be an essential characteristic of human selfhood: the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint or point of view, to step backwards, as it were, and view and judge that standpoint or point of view from the outside. In heroic society there is no 'outside' except that of the stranger. A man who tried to withdraw himself from his given position in heroic society would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear.

Identity in heroic society involves particularity and accountability. I am answerable for doing or failing to do what anyone who occupies my role owes to others and this accountability terminates only with death. I have until my death to do what I have to do. Moreover this accountability is particular. It is to, for and with specific individuals that I must do what I ought, and it is to these same and other individuals, members of the same local community, that I am accountable. The heroic self does not itself aspire to universality even although in retrospect we may recognize universal worth in the achievements of that self.

The exercise of the heroic virtues thus requires both a particular kind of human being and a particular kind of social structure. Just because this is so, an inspection of the heroic virtues may at first sight appear irrelevant to any general enquiry into moral theory and practice. If the heroic virtues require for their exercise the presence of a kind of social structure which is now irrevocably lost—as they do—what relevance can they possess for us? Nobody now can be a Hector or a Gisli. The answer is that perhaps what we have to learn from heroic societies is twofold: first that all morality is always to some degree tied to the socially local and particular and that the aspirations of the morality of modernity to a universality freed from all

particularity is an illusion; and secondly that there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors in which series heroic societies hold first place. If this is so, the contrast between the freedom of choice of values of which modernity prides itself and the absence of such choice in heroic cultures would look very different. For freedom of choice of values would from the standpoint of a tradition ultimately rooted in heroic societies appear more like the freedom of ghosts—of those whose human substance approached vanishing point—than of men.

It is the certitude which this absence of choice provides that at one level makes the task of the commentator upon the *Iliad* so relatively easy. What is an *aretê* and what is not is easily determined; there is no disagreement within the *Iliad* on such matters. But when the lexicographer has completed his list, a more difficult question does arise. I have already noted that physical strength, courage and intelligence are among the excellences. In the *Odyssey* Penelope speaks of her *aretai* where we should speak of her attractions. But, more puzzlingly to us, in the *Odyssey* prosperity too is spoken of as an excellence. The unity of the notion of an *aretê* resides, as we have already seen, in the concept of that which enables a man to discharge his role; and it is easy to see that prosperity—and happiness—have also a different part in the Homeric poems. When Sarpedon remembers his orchards and his cornfields back in Lycia during the agonies of battle by the ships, he reflects that it is because he and Glaucus are foremost among the warriors that they are held to deserve such good things. Prosperity is thus a by-product of achievement in war and from this springs the paradox: those who pursue that course which entitles them to the happiness that is represented by orchards and cornfields, by life with Andromache or Penelope, pursue a course whose characteristic end is death.

Death in Homer is an unmixed evil; the ultimate evil is death followed by desecration of the body. The latter is an evil suffered by the kin and the household of the dead man as well as by the corpse. Conversely it is through the performance of burial rites that the family and the community can restore their integrity after the death of what was part of themselves. Thus funeral rites and funeral games are key episodes in the moral scheme, and grief, understood as the ability to mourn, is a key human emotion.

As Simone Weil saw so clearly, the condition of slavery in the *Iliad* is very close to the condition of death. The slave is someone who may be killed at any minute; he is outside the heroic community. The suppliant too, who has been forced to beg for what he must have, has put himself at the mercy of another and so renders himself a potential corpse or slave. Hence the role of the suppliant is to be assumed only under the most ex-

treme of necessities. It is only when the desecration of Hector's body is to be followed by the deprivation of burial rites that Priam, being a king, is compelled to become a suppliant.

To be a suppliant, to be a slave, to be slain on the battlefield is to have been defeated; and defeat is the moral horizon of the Homeric hero, that beyond which nothing is to be seen, nothing lies. But defeat is not the Homeric poet's moral horizon, and it is precisely by reason of this difference that the Homer of the *Iliad* transcends the limitations of the society which he portrays. For what Homer puts in question, as his characters do not, is what it is to win and what it is to lose. Here once more the analogy with later conceptions of a game and of winning and losing in the context of games is dangerous but unavoidable. For our games, like our wars, are descendants of the Homeric *agôn* and yet are as different as they are in key part because the concepts of winning and losing have so different a place in our culture.

What the poet of the *Iliad* sees and his characters do not is that winning too may be a form of losing. The poet is not a theorist; he offers no general formulas. His own knowledge is indeed at a more general and abstract level than that even of his most insightful characters. For Achilles in his moment of reconciliation with Priam has no way of representing to himself what Homer is able in his account of Achilles and Priam to represent to others. Thus the *Iliad* puts in question what neither Achilles nor Hector can put in question; the poem lay claim to a form of understanding which it denies to those whose actions it describes.

What I have said of the *Iliad* is certainly not true of all heroic poetry; but it is true of some of the Icelandic sagas. Indeed in a late saga such as *Njáls Saga* the saga writer is at pains to distinguish those characters who are able to transcend the values of the saga world from those who are not. In *Gísla Saga Súrsonnar* what the saga writer understands, as the characters do not, is the complementary truth to that of the *Iliad*: losing may on occasion be a form of winning. When Gisli after his years of outlawry finally dies fighting back to back with his wife and sister-in-law, the three of them killing or fatally wounding eight of the fifteen men who had hoped to earn the price on Gisli's head, it is not Gisli who loses.

Thus this type of heroic poetry represents a form of society about whose moral structure two central claims are made. The first is that that structure embodies a conceptual scheme which has three central interrelated elements: a conception of what is required by the social role which each individual inhabits; a conception of excellences or virtues as those qualities which enable an individual to do what his or her role requires; and a conception of the human condition as fragile and vulnerable to

destiny and to death, such that to be virtuous is not to avoid vulnerability and death, but rather to accord them their due. None of these three elements can be made fully intelligible without reference to the other two; but the relationship between them is not merely conceptual. It is rather that all three elements can find their interrelated places only within a larger unitary framework, deprived of which we could not understand their significance for each other. This framework is the narrative form of epic or saga, a form embodied in the moral life of individuals and in the collective social structure. Heroic social structure *is* enacted epic narrative.

The characters in the epic have, as I noticed earlier, no means of viewing the human and natural world except that provided by the conceptions which inform their world-view. But just for that reason they have no doubt that reality is as they represent it to themselves. They present us with a view of the world for which they claim truth. The implicit epistemology of the heroic world is a thoroughgoing realism.

It is indeed partly because the literature of heroic societies makes *this* claim that it so difficult to recognize Nietzsche's later self-serving portrait of their aristocratic inhabitants. The poets of the *Iliad* and the saga writers were implicitly claiming an objectivity for their own standpoint of a kind quite incompatible with a Nietzschean perspectivism. But if the poets and the saga writers fail to be proto-Nietzscheans, what about the characters whom they portray? Here again it is clear that Nietzsche had to mythologize the distant past in order to sustain his vision. What Nietzsche portrays is aristocratic *self*-assertion; what Homer and the sagas show are forms of assertion proper to and required by a certain *role*. The self becomes what it is in heroic societies only through its role; it is a social creation, not an individual one. Hence when Nietzsche projects back on to the archaic past his own nineteenth-century individualism, he reveals that what looked like an historical enquiry was actually an inventive literary construction. Nietzsche replaces the fictions of the Enlightenment individualism, of which he is so contemptuous, with a set of individualist fictions of his own. From this it does not follow that one could not be an undeceived Nietzschean; and the whole importance of being a Nietzschean does after all lie in the triumph of being finally undeceived, being, as Nietzsche put it, truthful at last. It is simply, one might be tempted to conclude, that any would-be true Nietzschean will after all have to go further than Nietzsche. But is this indeed all?

The contemporary Nietzschean by his rejection of his immediate cultural environment—as Nietzsche himself rejected Wilhelmine Germany—and by his discovery that that in the past which Nietzsche praised was fiction rather than fact is condemned to an existence which aspires to trans-

cend all relationship to the past. But is such transcendence possible? We are, whether we acknowledge it or not, what the past has made us and we cannot eradicate from ourselves, even in America, those parts of ourselves which are formed by our relationship to each formative stage in our history. If this is so, then even heroic society is still inescapably a part of us all, and we are narrating a history that is peculiarly *our own history* when we recount its past in the formation of our moral culture.

Any attempt to write this history will necessarily encounter Marx's claim that the reason why Greek epic poetry has the power over us which it still retains derives from the fact that the Greeks stand to civilized modernity as the child to the adult. That is one way of conceiving the relationship of the past to the present. Whether it is a way in which justice can be done to the relationship between ourselves and the *Iliad* is a question which could only be answered if we had enquired into the intervening stages of social and moral order which at once separate us from and connect us to the world in which the *Iliad* was rooted. Those intervening stages will put to the question two central beliefs of the heroic age. They will force us to ask in the context of forms of complexity quite alien to heroic society whether it can remain true that a human life as a whole can be envisaged as a victory or a defeat and what winning and losing really consist in and amount to. And they will press upon us the question as to whether the narrative forms of the heroic age are not mere childlike storytelling, so that moral discourse while it may use fables and parables as aids to the halting moral imagination ought in its serious adult moments to abandon the narrative mode for a more discursive style and genre.