

A NOTE ON HOMERIC MORALITY

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MICHAEL GAGARIN truly remarks that “any conclusion about morality in Homer depends to a large extent on precisely what we mean by ‘morality.’” The best way of discovering that is not to examine philosophers’ definitions of the term, but to see how it is used in ordinary speech. If one looks up “morality” in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston, 1970), one is referred to the article on “ethics,” where one reads: “1a. The study of the general nature of morals and of the specific moral choices to be made by the individual in his relationship with others; the philosophy of morals. Also called ‘moral philosophy.’ b. The moral sciences as a whole, including moral philosophy and customary, civil, and religious law. Used with a singular verb: ‘Jurisprudence . . . is the principal and most perfect branch of ethics.’ (Blackstone). 2. The rules or standards governing the conduct of members of a profession: ‘all citizens share in blame for lax municipal ethics.’ (Christian Science Monitor). 3. Any set of moral principles or values. 4. The moral quality of a course of action; fitness; propriety. . . .” The section of the article most relevant to the topic in hand would seem to be the second; but subsection 1b, which points out the relation between morality and jurisprudence, is also interesting in this connection.

In my book *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971; 2d ed., 1983), I tried to sketch the essential features of Greek religion and to indicate its bearing on the ethics of early Greek society. This was (and is) not at all a fashionable thing to do. The application of anthropology to the study of Greek religion had long since provoked a sharp reaction against the once prevalent and too easy assumption that Greek religion is readily accessible to modern understanding. Even in the introduction to a book published in Cambridge in 1985, *Greek Religion and Society*, edited by P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir, the late Sir Moses Finley reiterated his insistence that Greek religion was “fundamentally alien” to the modern mind, sternly warning us, as though the idea were quite new, that to comprehend it we must be prepared to make use of anthropological parallels from the cultures of remote peoples like the Dinka.¹

1. Finley’s attitude has influenced the contributors to the book: admirable though most of their contributions are, for them Greek religion is a “system of responses,” about whose ethical element they say virtually nothing.

Far be it from me to dispute the importance of anthropology for the study of Greek religion, or of any religion, or to deny the existence of complicated systems of thought that the scholar must unravel or (if people like) "decode." But the Greeks were human beings like ourselves, many of them were highly articulate, and if we study them carefully enough and do not take it for granted that we can get inside their way of thinking, we may understand them better than our predecessors did, especially now that Christianity has lost the firm grip on the western mind and imagination that it retained so long.

When Arthur Adkins compiled the doctoral thesis whose tenets he has so consistently defended, he approached Greek religion from a distance, in the manner of an anthropologist, his own ethical standpoint being made plain on page 2 of *Merit and Responsibility*: "For any man brought up in a western democratic society the related concepts of duty and responsibility are the central concepts of ethics; and we are inclined to take it as an unquestionable truth, though there is abundant evidence to the contrary, that the same must be true of all societies. In this respect, at least, we are all Kantians now." Even in 1960 not quite all of us were Kantians, and even fewer of us are today. In any case, Kantians have no monopoly on the concepts of duty and responsibility, and the absence from a particular society of talk about these things does not necessarily imply the absence of the things themselves. It seems to me that, as the dictionary definition quoted earlier would imply, different societies and religions generate different moralities, which may profitably be studied by comparing them with each other. Since they are called moralities, they are likely to have certain qualities in common.

But I am not now concerned with the views of Adkins, especially since I have lately touched on them in the epilogue added to the second edition of my book. I am concerned with those of Gagarin, who claims that he has established a middle position between the views of Adkins and my own. His method is to separate off law from morality. He divides relations into which morality may enter into three groups: first, relations with persons connected to oneself by some social or legal bond, and with persons in a position to reciprocate whatever actions we may take with regard to them; second, relations with the gods; and third, relations with persons to whom our connection is "less direct" and with reference to whom self-interest is not so clearly defined. This third category includes relations with guests, suppliants, and beggars. Gagarin argues that since relations with persons belonging to the two former categories are regulated by law and are normally determined by self-interest, morality does not enter into them; but he is willing to allow that it enters into our relationships with persons belonging to the third category. No action, he seems to think, is in any sense moral unless it is done purely for its own sake.

Gagarin's notion of morality would seem to differ considerably from the sense given to that term in ordinary language, in which it is applied, as the dictionary definition says, to "any set of moral principles or

values." Legality is indeed by no means the same thing as morality, as a glance at the working of almost any legal system will suffice to show. But entirely to separate off from morality any relations that are regulated by law is an arbitrary procedure that altogether fails to do justice to the feelings about law and morality that ordinary people entertain in everyday life.

First of all, though law is not identical with morality, it is generally felt that it should stand in some relation to it. The remark of Blackstone quoted in the dictionary definition may be regarded as a somewhat extreme statement, characteristic of the eighteenth century; but it expresses a view that in almost all cultures must be reckoned with. In early Greece, Heraclitus gave it expression when he wrote that all human laws are nurtured by the divine law (frag. 114 D.-K.=23 M.); and in actual practice, even in our own time, the interpretation of the law and the resolution of conflicts between laws frequently involve questions that are to a lesser or a greater extent moral. Our relations with persons belonging to Gagarin's first category, like all our relations with other persons, are often governed or at least affected by self-interest; but does that mean that morality does not enter into them at all? If one believes, as Gagarin (like Adkins) seems to believe, that no action is moral unless it is done for its own sake, perhaps one would answer in the affirmative. But this is a notion that would be rejected by most moral philosophers, as well as by the overwhelming majority of mankind.

Gagarin's belief in this highly questionable proposition obviously affects his account of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon in the first book of the *Iliad*. Since the dispute raises legal issues, he thinks, it cannot raise moral issues; since Nestor, in trying to settle the dispute, appeals to the self-interest of the contending parties, he cannot be concerned with justice. But in this case a solution that conduces to the interests of both parties will be a just solution; and though Nestor for obvious reasons does not tell Agamemnon that he will be acting unjustly if he deprives Achilles of his prize, it is clear enough that this is what he thinks.

Gagarin is willing to allow that morality is relevant to men's relations with persons falling into his third category. He is also obliged to admit that when there is talk of the pity Achilles ought to feel for his fellow-soldiers, morality may enter into the situation; and since the fellow-soldiers in question belong not to his third category of persons but to his first, this admission is disastrous to his argument. Pity is not "a moral quality," as Gagarin calls it, but an emotion; but Gagarin means by pity the regard a man feels for his associates in consequence of the relationship between them. This regard is affected by what Gagarin calls law, but such regard has also an element that cannot be explained in legal terms, as Gagarin shows himself aware.

Although in a footnote Gagarin mentions Colin Macleod's commentary on the twenty-fourth book of the *Iliad* (Cambridge, 1982), he says little about that book, which as Macleod has shown forms the climax of

the entire poem. In all probability he has been prevented from thinking of the *Iliad* as a poem with a basic unity and a structure of its own by acquiescence in the deductions that the school of Albert Lord wrongly drew from Parry's theory of oral poetry; he seems to be interested in epic poetry mainly as a source of information about ancient law. He has nowhere tried conclusions with my contention that besides meaning "justice," the word δίκη connotes a universal order that the gods maintain: this order, though it is by no means moral in the sense in which Christianity believes in a moral order, cannot be said to be without a moral element. When Gagarin remarks that the gods seldom punish crime by direct action, he seems to have forgotten that, as I took care to point out in *The Justice of Zeus*, the Greek gods influence events on earth usually through nature, particularly human nature. This overriding concern for human behavior shown by Zeus may not be moral in a Christian or a Kantian sense, but that does not mean that, in a generally acceptable sense of the term, it lacks a moral element.

In short, it seems to me that Gagarin's attempt to establish by legalistic hair-splitting a *via media* between Adkins and myself has not been a very great success.²

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2. I have treated of problems relevant to this topic in two recent essays: "Psychoanalysis and the Study of the Ancient World," in *Freud and the Humanities*, ed. P. Horden (London and New York, 1985), pp. 152-80; and "Ehre und Schande in der griechischen Kultur," *A&A* 33 (1987): 1-28.