

Ethics before Socrates

CATHERINE ROWETT

It is sometimes said that no one talked about ethics until Socrates diverted philosophy from its early investigations into nature towards matters of practical value. The popularity of this rather inaccurate claim may be due to Aristotle, or perhaps Cicero.¹ Part of my aim in this chapter is to put the record straight, to investigate what we can find among the Presocratic philosophers that can be construed as ethical, and to note a few small but interesting contributions made by these thinkers to the development of Western moral philosophy. Since the Sophists, who are sometimes counted among the Presocratics, are, for the purposes of this volume, included with Socrates in Chapter 2, our task in this chapter is to focus on ethical thought before the Sophists. That means we shall be covering the period up to the fifth century BCE. Before going further we should also note that most of the work of the Presocratic philosophers is lost, so we must reconstruct their ideas and arguments from a mixture of quotations in later writers and second-hand reports (*testimonia*). I cite the quoted fragments using the standard referencing system from Diels-Kranz.²

Obviously, the highly sophisticated challenges to traditional ethics that we find in the Presocratics, the Sophists and Socrates did not emerge out of nothing. When they investigate the notion of 'virtue', *aretê* – so prominent in Greek ethics – Greek philosophers are deploying and scrutinizing a concept that was familiar from ordinary language. 'Virtue' for any society consists in whatever characteristics command admiration and respect, which are the standard target in the society's education and training for young citizens. Just as modern societies privilege certain behaviors and attitudes of mind, so also

¹ Probably it was Aristotle (*Parts of Animals* 642a28; *Metaphysics* 987b1–4). See also Cicero *Tusculan Disputations* 5.4.10 and *Academica* 1.5.15.

² Diels and Kranz 1951. All subsequent editions and translations have concordances that link to these references.

did the social conditioning of ancient Greek *polis* cultures. These values are then the starting point of their enquiries into ethics.

In archaic Greece, a male child from a good family typically took classes with a grammar teacher and a music teacher, learning to read, copy and sing the works of the poets. He would also learn wrestling and athletics at the gym. Training in body and soul were needed to turn a boy into what a man should be. The psychological part of this training included poetry by Homer and Hesiod, and also the lyric poets, such as Simonides (c. 500 BCE). In Plato's dialogue *Protagoras*, set in about 433 BCE, the characters discuss some lines from a poem by Simonides about how hard it is to be good.³ Plato's character Protagoras asserts that the mark of a properly educated man is the ability to discuss poetry and to distinguish what is well said from what is not.⁴ Such discussions were not primarily literary or aesthetic, as the example in *Protagoras* shows: Protagoras considers whether Simonides' views about virtue and its attainability are consistent. The discussion of poetry was clearly not just a way to entertain friends. It provided an opportunity to engage with the ideas expressed there, in critical thinking and discussion. The poet is taken as a partner in the debate: someone who offers an opinion. The educated man is then expected to explain it, debate it, compare it with rival views in other poems. In studying and discussing the poets, young citizens would learn to think and ask questions, not just habituate themselves to an existing moral code (though there clearly was some of that).⁵

DO THE GODS LIE?

Homer's poems portray many colorful human characters, many of them with failings and character traits unsuitable for emulation. Achilles and Agamemnon squabble because Agamemnon (who still has a wife at home) has commandeered Achilles' favorite war prize (a princess, whose parents and husband Achilles had killed when the Greeks sacked Lyrnessus). That squabble forms the starting point of the *Iliad*; and things show little improvement in the rest of the poem.⁶ Equally, in the *Odyssey*, the wily Odysseus displays a canny habit of

³ Plato *Protagoras* 338e–347b. The poem is otherwise lost, apart from the lines that Plato quotes.

⁴ *Protagoras* 339a.

⁵ On early Greek moral thought, including Homer and Pindar, see McKirahan 1994: 356–63.

⁶ Arguably the Trojans appear more admirable, morally, than the Greeks. See Mackie 1996 and Hall 1989, and contrast the nineteenth-century attempt to show otherwise in Gladstone 1858.

lying to avoid trouble. Some Homeric characters are admirable (Penelope for instance); others are not. Rather than presenting these characters as ideal role models, schoolmasters surely must have valued the poems because they dramatize difficult choices in life, and illustrate the need for strength of character, to bear up through trials and misfortunes. There are also similar themes in Greek tragedy – as when Agamemnon must decide whether to sacrifice his daughter⁷ and when Antigone opts to bury her traitor brother.⁸ Students who read or performed these plays would clearly acquire a vivid understanding of the dilemmas and risks of adult life, and how to face misfortune with dignity.

It was not only the mortals who were portrayed as fickle and false, but also (more problematically, it seems) the gods. Homer's gods engage in deception, protect their favorites, set the odds against one in battle. Arguably such stories offer a salutary lesson for life. There is explanatory value in the idea that fortune is fickle, and that bad luck might be visited upon us by 'the gods'. We could see these motifs as evoking something equivalent to the idea that unfairness is built into the metaphysics of the world. Potentially this represents an ethical assessment of our predicament that we could still endorse even now.

On the other hand, by attributing this unpredictability to the disreputable behavior of the *gods*, the poets exposed themselves to potential criticism. In the sixth century BCE, the philosopher-poet Xenophanes developed a new philosophical notion of the divine as a single, unitary, all-powerful being, with perfect moral standards. In comparison with that ideal god, Xenophanes saw serious deficiencies in those all-too-human gods in Homer and the other poets.⁹ In Fragment 11, he writes:

Everything that's shameful and disgusting among human beings—
all this, Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods!
Stealing, adulterous affairs, cheating each other.

His implicit argument can be understood as follows: (1) proper gods are perfect, and cannot cheat or be deceived; (2) in Homer and Hesiod, the gods are immoral and easily corrupted; (3) therefore Homer and Hesiod present bad theology. His reasoning seems to draw on the following three ethical assumptions: first, the divine perfections include moral perfection; second, what is offensive among mortals is, or should be, equally offensive among gods, which implies that morality is no mere mortal convention; and third, one can criticize the poets (despite their reputation as the traditional

⁷ Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 204–27. See Nussbaum 1986. ⁸ Sophocles *Antigone*.

⁹ Plato *Republic* Book 3 continues the same campaign, a century or more later.

authority concerning theology and morality), because (apparently) reasoning trumps tradition in judging theological and ethical truth.

Besides philosophical poems, Xenophanes wrote after-dinner lyrics, of which two survive complete. In one of these (Fragment 2) Xenophanes remarks on the mistaken values of the *polis*, insofar as it typically bestows great honors on those who win at the Olympic Games. This is silly, he suggests, since athletic ability is of no real value to the athlete's city: no city improves its laws or fattens its coffers by winning in the Olympics. By contrast, real benefits can accrue if the city has a wise person in charge, so that is what should be honored and rewarded. It seems clear that Xenophanes is thinking of his own role as philosopher, and that he considers it a useful one and deserving of honor. The wise man contributes real benefits to the city's political and economic prosperity. Among other things, Xenophanes may well be thinking of the widespread practice of inviting a 'wise man' to draft the constitutions for new colonies, or to revise existing codes of law.¹⁰

In the other poem (Fragment 1), Xenophanes reflects on proper behavior at drinking parties. He is no puritan: 'It's not impolite to drink as much as you can take, so long as you can still get home without assistance.'¹¹ On the other hand, he has some ethical advice to give about what kind of stories to tell in the sympotic entertainment: one should not tell of the battles of Titans, Giants and Centaurs, he says, which are just figments of past ages. One should speak rather of historical deeds of valor (or virtue – the scope is unclear), based on actual living memory.¹²

NATURAL LAW AND HUMAN MORALITY

In Heraclitus (c. 500 BCE) we find what looks like a rival to Xenophanes' views on divinity, although much is uncertain, due to the obscurity and brevity of the Heraclitean sayings. Certainly, Homer and Hesiod come in for further attacks. Heraclitus wants Homer beaten and expelled from the poetry contests (along with Archilochus);¹³ he challenges Hesiod's reputation as a teacher of 'many things' (referring, perhaps, to the practical advice in *Works and Days*).¹⁴ On the other hand, Heraclitus denies that we can read off

¹⁰ Xenophanes fr 2.19 DK. Cf. Aelian *Varia Historia* 3.17 on known philosophers involved in political guidance or legislation (though Xenophanes is not included there).

¹¹ Xenophanes fr 1.17–18 DK. ¹² Xenophanes fr 1.20 DK. ¹³ Heraclitus fr 42 DK.

¹⁴ Heraclitus fr 57 DK. Cf. fr 40 DK which criticizes Hesiod, Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Hecataeus for achieving polymathy without wisdom.

theological ethical standards from human ones. As regards ethics (*êthos*), he says, 'human life lacks standards, while the divine life has them'.¹⁵ And 'Compared to God, the wisest human resembles an ape, in wisdom, beauty and everything else.'¹⁶ So when he says 'To God, all things are noble and good and just, but human beings have understood some of them to be unjust and others just',¹⁷ it seems that Heraclitus probably means that we cannot discover absolute moral truths by looking at human moral codes. This could imply that there are no absolute moral truths. Alternatively he may mean that, if such truths exist, they are quite unlike morality as we know it. On the other hand some sayings suggest a close dependency connection between divine morality and civic customs: Fragment 114 claims that human customs draw nourishment from a divine law and are to be respected and defended. And in Fragment 53 Heraclitus pithily observes that war (here called 'king') is what divides people into the slaves and the free.

REINCARNATION AND CLEAN HANDS

Particularly characteristic of early philosophy in southern Italy (including the Pythagorean tradition) is an interest in the transmigration of the soul into other bodies (human, animal or plant) after death. These reincarnation theories typically include ethical components. For instance, there may be a way to escape from the cycle of lives, or advance to a higher life, by achieving certain exacting standards of purity and sanctity.

For Pythagoras himself (sixth century BCE) we struggle to reconstruct the doctrines reliably, due to limited and often contaminated evidence, but we have better resources relating to the poet-philosopher Empedocles (fifth century BCE). Empedocles holds that the world is alternately governed by forces of increasing love (drawing things together) and increasing strife (setting things at odds and apart), with intervening periods of unity and division. Alongside this cosmic structure, he has an ethical story about souls (*daimones*) that wander in exile, tormented by strife and longing to return to their divine home under love.¹⁸

¹⁵ Heraclitus fr 78 DK. I have translated *êthos* as 'life' and *gnômai* as 'standards'. Alternatively *gnômai* might mean 'measures', or 'wits', or 'judgement'.

¹⁶ Heraclitus fr 83 DK. ¹⁷ Heraclitus fr 102 DK.

¹⁸ For present purposes we need not settle the controversy over whether Empedocles wrote separate poems about cosmology and ethics. I shall treat the two topics as interrelated, and I adopt 'soul' as a serviceable (but not loaded) term for what Empedocles means by *daimon*.

If this cycle of love and strife is cosmic and automated, what prospect can there be that the soul could voluntarily improve its chances of a rapid return from exile? What scope do we have to combat the inexorable advance of strife?¹⁹ It seems that there must be some room for choice and moral responsibility; for according to the poem's protagonist, pictured as a soul in exile, we are held blameworthy for some offences, and for their dire consequences. There are passages that lament the sin of eating meat,²⁰ and exhort the listener to avoid killing animals for sacrifice and eating 'each other'.²¹ The reason is apparently that the animals due to be killed and eaten are members of one's own family. The argument must be something like this: 'You would be horrified by eating your own child or mother; but you kill and eat some animal, supposing it is not your mother or child; but in fact it is, or might be, just that. So, you should be horrified.' The argument is not spelled out in this way, but is expressed as a myth, and a cry of despair. Nevertheless, it clearly appeals to motifs such as the sanctity of life, and the kinship of all living beings (or the impossibility of knowing which are kin).²²

In other surviving fragments, Empedocles describes a world in which everyone was gentle and kind, humans and animals lived together, and there were no blood sacrifices.²³ This was apparently a sort of golden age, when Love was Queen.²⁴ Is this alternative regime something that we can restore by our own moral efforts, or does it just happen automatically when the time is right? The answer is unclear, but either way, it is clearly an ethically superior society, and an ideal that the true followers should long for.

DID DEMOCRITUS ANTICIPATE SOCRATES?

Our search for ethics before Socrates concludes with Democritus (fifth century, contemporary with the Sophists and Socrates). He is famous above all for his atomist physical theory, but we also have a considerable body of material, albeit fragmentary, that relates to ethics.

In approaching Democritus' ethics, there is a risk of falling into one of two problematic patterns of thought. One is to treat the texts as isolated

¹⁹ For a more technical (and controversial) exploration of this question see Osborne 2005: 283–308.

²⁰ Strasbourg Papyrus, Ensemble d (probably identical to fr 139 DK, or repetition of identical lines).

²¹ Empedocles fr 136, 137, 138 DK.

²² For a fuller exploration see Osborne 2007: ch. 3. ²³ Empedocles fr 128, 130.

²⁴ Empedocles fr 128.3.

moralizing sayings, banal, trivial, with no systematic theory to offer in either ethics or meta-ethics. Another is to allow expectations from later (or indeed contemporary) Greek ethics to color our reading of Democritus' work. For instance, it might be tempting to read motifs from specifically Socratic ethics into Democritus, or to look for motifs from later Greek ethics more generally, e.g. by looking for evidence of 'eudaimonism' – that is, the idea that the ultimate goal of ethical conduct is 'happiness' or *eudaimonia*.²⁵ Both approaches can be problematic. They encourage us to slide across the surface and miss what is distinctive in Democritus' sayings. Instead I shall try to pick out what is distinctive, by looking carefully at just a few texts. We can then ask, once we have read the texts, whether what we find there looks Socratic in anything more than a shallow sense.²⁶

Democritus suggests that we should take as our goal a certain cheerful psychological condition that he calls '*euthumia*' (which I shall translate as 'good spirits').²⁷ This is clearly a technical term in his writings. The '*thumos*' component of the word seems to refer to the emotions and feelings, which is why I say that it is a psychological condition. The '*eu*' component means 'well' or 'good'. If we understand *euthumia* as a sense of well-being – a subjective attitude or feeling rather than an objective state of one's external affairs – it need not be directly tied to worldly success or external conditions.

Should we equate 'good spirits' with merely feeling good about oneself, whether or not one's inner or outer situation is actually any good? The answer is probably 'no'. Democritus has things to say about what kind of life is worth pursuing, and what one should feel good about: it seems that one needs wisdom and virtue; one should not choose (or be satisfied with) a life of wrongdoing or folly. So it seems that one cannot achieve genuine 'good spirits' by pursuing base pleasures, or feeling content with those. Perhaps he thinks that if one lacks wisdom, one will not actually be able to adopt the correct attitude to fortune and misfortune.

A good life is not, however, primarily one of civic or domestic hyperactivity. On the contrary, Democritus seems to have a rather simpler life in mind, to reduce the risk of misfortune that accompanies public service and

²⁵ See Annas 2002: 169–82. Osborne 2007: 198–201 finds a form of utilitarianism in the material on the death penalty and killing animals.

²⁶ Note that we have no sources uncontaminated by knowledge of Socrates and later ethical traditions. This affects what material has survived.

²⁷ For the noun *euthumia* and the verb *euthumeisthai* see Democritus DK 68 A166, A167, A169 (where Cicero gives the technical term in Greek), B3, B4, B189, B258.

ambition. A relatively long extract from Democritus recorded by both Plutarch and Stobaeus advises the reader not to be excessively busy:

To be in good spirits, you need to avoid doing a lot of things, either at home or in the community; and in choosing what to do, you should avoid things beyond your own capacities and nature. There is nothing else you need to guard against – then if you encounter misfortune and it invites you to consider something beyond what is fitting, you can lay it to rest, and not apply yourself to things beyond your means. For something of a good size is more secure than something of a vast size.²⁸

Here we see a pattern of thought that was picked up by Martha Nussbaum, in her motif of ‘the fragility of goodness’.²⁹ Democritus suggests that we should find a way of life that is relatively immune to misfortune, and relatively secure from total disaster and failure. Misfortune may throw us off course; but the reason for that, he suggests, is that it can encourage us to aim for the impossible, in our urgent attempt to preserve what was always going to be too vulnerable to save. We may well lose more in the process of trying to save the grand things that we had. It is better, then, to settle for a moderate life, relatively unambitious, and adopt an attitude of equanimity, that resists the desire to get the biggest things (which are at the same time the most risky).

The text just quoted does not specify exactly what those bigger (but risky) rewards might be. Nor does it say what are the more moderate rewards that are within our power to obtain and keep. The picture is filled out somewhat by another text on the same theme, quoted at length by Stobaeus:

Good spirits is what people get as a result of a moderate amount of pleasure and a symmetry of life.³⁰ When things are lacking, or superabundant, that tends to throw one off track, and cause large motions in the soul. But souls that are moved that far are not well settled or in good spirits.

So one should set one’s heart on things that are possible, and be content with the things that are available. When it comes to the things that people desire and wonder at, one should hardly remember them and not dwell on them in one’s mind. Instead one should regard those whose lives are afflicted with misfortune, thinking upon how sorely they are troubled. That way, what is available to you, and what belongs to you, will appear magnificent and desirable. The soul will not any longer be afflicted with the disease of wanting more . . .

²⁸ Democritus DK 68 B3. ²⁹ Nussbaum 1986.

³⁰ ‘Symmetry’ is a literal translation of *summetriê*. It might mean a life that is not unbalanced, or avoids having areas of lack and areas of excess.

With a heart in this condition, you will pass your life in better spirits, and will rid yourself of more than a few of life's trials: envy, possessiveness and ill will.³¹

It seems that the 'greater and more risky things' (paraphrase) of the earlier passage, and the 'things that people desire and wonder at' in this passage, are roughly the same. Here they are contrasted with the misfortunes of those who are in trouble. The wise thing to do is to avoid ambitious activity in the public and private sphere, which can lead to vast and impressive achievements that are the envy of ordinary people. The less ambitious things that are merely of a 'good size', and not 'vast' (in the first passage) may be activities reflecting intellectual virtue or moral virtue or both. Like Socrates, Democritus sometimes implies that doing wrong is the result of ignorance,³² that the wrongdoer is less happy than the one wronged,³³ and that the best policy for achieving secure contentment is to be self-controlled and set one's heart on immaterial goods.³⁴ Wisdom is also mentioned as the *sine qua non* of the life of good spirits.³⁵

There are clearly some similarities between these thoughts and those attributed to Socrates. But we should be careful to notice the differences as well. Democritus is interested in how one can make oneself feel good about one's own moderate success, rather than envying the success of others. We are advised to attend to the misfortunes of others, in order to restore a balance in our perception of what counts as good. This is about one's subjective attitude of acceptance, not about objective success or failure in either one's inner life or one's outer activities. Democritus' interest is in the person's psychological good spirits rather than the objective justice and goodness of their soul.

This seems to me to be different from Socrates, who is concerned with the health of the human soul in a very different sense; because, in Socrates' view, nothing, however painful, can outweigh the objective damage that one does to oneself by committing injustice or avoiding punishment – regardless of whether one feels pained by it or not. Socrates does not suggest that we look at the miseries of others in order to feel good about ourselves. When he talks about the misfortunes of the 'miserable' and their pitiable lives, he means those who have embraced corruption in their lives and in their souls, and he points at them in order to warn us of the incomparable dangers of an evil and corrupted soul, and especially of feeling happy about being in that terrible condition. So whereas, for Democritus, the 'unfortunate' ones are those with very few worldly goods and little power – that is, even fewer and less than one's own – for Socrates, by contrast, the 'unfortunate' ones are those with

³¹ Democritus DK 68 B191. ³² Democritus DK 68 B83. ³³ Democritus DK 68 B45.

³⁴ Democritus DK 68 B77, 189, 211, 235, 236, 284, etc. ³⁵ Democritus DK 68 B216.

masses of worldly goods and immense political power. Such tyrants are unfortunate not because they have lost the enviable goods of this world, but because they have lost their moral virtue, and have not grasped the extent of their own misfortune.³⁶

If I am right, Democritus thinks that a person is best off if they have a modicum of successful achievements and worldly goods, of a kind that are relatively secure and not subject to loss, or moderate goods whose loss will be relatively painless. He also thinks (rightly, I suspect) that it is easier to be carefree and happy with little than with much, and that one can achieve that sense of well-being effectively by comparing one's life with that of others, noticing how well off one is, by comparison with those who have even less. Although it is probable that among the simple goods that he proposes for a carefree life, immaterial goods such as simple virtue, wisdom and friendship would be good examples – things that have a low risk of loss – Democritus does not really anticipate Socrates' radical division between inner health and outward goods, which is what leads to the Socratic position, a self-sacrificial preference for virtue over any other rival value.

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³⁶ E.g. the references to the tyrant Archelaus in Socrates' discussion with Polus in Plato's *Gorgias*.