

Basil the Great

Reading 3 – Poetry – Paying Attention to Virtue in Poetry

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Reading 3

Poetry – Paying Attention to Virtue in Poetry

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

IN BRIEF: *Basil advises the young to pay attention to those passages in poetry and other writing having to do with virtue. Given the responsive and formable nature of their minds, this point is particularly important for them. He goes on to mention and give examples from five Greek authors (Hesiod, Homer, Solon, Theognis, Prodicus), who praise virtue and call on men to travel along her road rather than that of vice. All stress the superiority and benefits of virtue as compared with vice, as well as any other object or experience typically valued by humans.*

SINCE IT IS through virtue that we must enter upon this life of ours, and since much has been said in celebration of virtue by the poets and prose writers, and even more by the philosophers, we must particularly turn our attention and apply ourselves to such literature.¹ [2] I say all this because it is no small advantage for a certain friendliness and habitual

association with virtue to be produced in the souls of the young. This is so because the learning of the young is most likely indelible since it has been deeply stamped upon them by reason of the plasticity of their souls.²

[3] Or what else, if not an exhortation for the young to virtue, are we to assume Hesiod had in mind when

he composed the following verses that everyone is singing? That—“the steep road that leads to virtue is at first rugged and hard to travel, full of much sweat and lengthy toil.”³

[4] Therefore, it is not for everyone to advance along this uphill road, nor, once advancing, is it easy to reach the summit. Still, when a man has reached the top, he sees that the road is smooth and beautiful and easy to travel over. It is more pleasant than the other road that leads to wickedness—which one may have in abundance from near at hand, as the same poet says. [5] It seems to me that Hesiod had no other purpose in making these points than to turn us toward virtue and summon all men to be good, and so that we might not become weak and cowardly when faced with suffering and toil, quitting before we reach the goal.

And, to be sure, if any other man has celebrated virtue in the manner of Hesiod, let us favorably receive his words as leading to the same goal as our own.

[6] Now, as I myself have heard a man say who is skillful at closely examining the mind and meaning of a poet, all Homer’s poetry is a commendation of virtue.⁴ And with Homer, everything apart from what is incidental leads to this end—not least of which are those lines where he makes the princess stand in awe of the leader of the Cephallenians when Odysseus first appears alone and naked after being saved from the shipwreck. Even so, since Homer portrays him as adorned with virtue instead of clothing, he was far from incurring shame by merely being seen naked. [7] Thereafter, indeed, the rest of the Phaeacians counted him worthy of reverence, handing over to him the luxury by which they lived. They all looked on him with admiration, counting him fortunate. And there was not one Phaeacian at that moment who longed for anything else but to become Odysseus—the same one just saved from the shipwreck.⁵ [8] The interpreter of the poet’s meaning said that Homer practically shouts it aloud in these passages, saying, “You must care for virtue, men—virtue, which swims ashore with the shipwrecked man and makes him, when he comes naked to dry land, more honored than the prosperous Phaeacians.”

[9] And indeed, such is the case. As in a game of dice, all other possessions belong to the possessor no more than to any other man who chances to win, shifting from this one to the other. Virtue is the only possession that cannot be taken away.⁶ It remains while we are living and when we have completed this life. As it seems to me, it was for this reason, indeed, that Solon said the following while addressing the wealthy: “But we will not exchange with them our virtue for their wealth since the one lasts forever, while money and possessions change their owners from day to day.”

[10] Nearly resembling these sentiments are those words from Theognis in which he declares that the god—whatever he may mean by saying “the god”—inclines the scale for men at one time *this* way and at another time *that* way, now to be wealthy but now to have nothing.

[11] Furthermore, Prodicus, the sophist from Ceos, explored similar notions regarding virtue and vice in his own writings. Therefore, we must also apply our minds to him, not tossing the man out as worthless. [12] Prodicus’ account goes something like the following—as far as I can recall the man’s thoughts, anyway. I do not know the account word for word, but only that he spoke without meter in this way: When Heracles was quite young, just about your age right now, he was considering which road he should take—the one leading through suffering and toil to virtue or the easiest road. Just then, two women approached. These were Virtue and Vice.

[13] Now, even though they were silent, the difference between them was evident in their appearance. The one woman had been decked out for beauty through the art of embellishment. She was overflowing with extravagance, taking with her every stream of pleasure dependent on vice. Now, with these things displayed, and promising even more than these, she endeavored to drag Heracles to her. [14] But the other woman was lean and unwashed. She looked at him intensely, speaking differently to him. For she promised nothing relaxed or pleasant. Instead, she offered him a whole ocean of sweat—countless sufferings and toils and dangers through

every land and sea. Nevertheless, the prize for these In the end, Heracles followed the latter woman.⁷ was to become a god—or so Prodicus’ account has it.

So ends Reading 3. **See you in Reading 4,**
 “Keeping in Mind the Final Goal – Training Hard, Taking in What Is Useful.”

NOTES

¹ For a comprehensive presentation of how the ancient Greeks spoke about and understood virtue (or excellence) from Homer to Plotinus, see *Aretē (Excellence or Virtue): What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

² Compare to Seneca, *Letter* 108.12: “. . . When the mind is young, it may most easily be won over to desire what is honorable and upright.” And Plutarch, *On the Education of Children* 5 (*Moralia* 3e-f): “For childhood is a tender thing and easily wrought into any shape. The souls of children readily receive the impressions of those things that are dropped into them while they are yet but soft. . . . And as soft wax is apt to take the stamp of the seal, so are the minds of children to receive the instructions imprinted on them at that age.”

³ See Hesiod, *Works and Days* 289-291. Lilah Grace Canevaro reports that this one passage alone “is quoted some twenty-six times in extant literature dating from 70 BC to AD 300.” See Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod’s Works & Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8. If we reference earlier Greek literature, the number of citations expands, including writers such as Plato and Xenophon.

⁴ N.G. Wilson notes that “this view of Homer’s poetry, which helped it to maintain its position in the educational curriculum, is seen in Dio Chrysostom 43 [sic], Horace *Epistles* 1.2.1-4, and most fully in the scholia [anonymous commentary] on the *Iliad*. . . . In these scholia the attempt to draw a moral lesson from each episode is taken to great lengths. . . .” (*Saint Basil on Greek Literature*, 52). Dio Chrysostom, for instance, states, “. . . It would be a great task if one should recount all that Homer composed about virtue and vice. . . .” (*Oration* 53).

⁵ See *Odyssey* 6.135-243; 7.142ff.; 8.17-23 and 387-397.

⁶ Compare to one of the Cynic Antisthenes’ sayings: “Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away” (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 6.12). For more on the Cynics and Cynic philosophy, see *The Cynics: Cynic Philosophy for Desiring, Enduring & Living Well* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2020) or *The Best of the Cynics* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2020).

⁷ For another telling of Prodicus’ story, see Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 2.1-34.

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