

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue

Reading 2 – The *Aretē* Spectrum – from Inanimate to Divine *Aretē*

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave's mission?** Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul." – Plato

"Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away." – Antisthenes

"Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue." – Aristotle

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Reading 2

The *Aretē* Spectrum – from Inanimate to Divine *Aretē*

Reading 2

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.

Please visit and support our sponsors.

This reading comes from the Cave's

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē.

As the title indicates, this reading, after a brief introduction, presents what various Greeks thought and said about the *aretē* (excellence or virtue) spectrum.

THE EARLY STOICS taught that "excellence is in one sense the perfection of anything in general, say of a statue."¹ This seems to have been the common view of the ancient Greeks. They recognized *aretē* in many things extending from the non-living to the living.

Though the Greeks did not explicitly do so, we may call this range of excellence *the aretē spectrum*, a field of high quality, merit, and perfection that spanned from inanimate things like soil, cotton, bread, and compositions on the one hand, to living things such as horses, dogs, human beings, and gods on the other.

In this chapter, we'll begin with the inanimate side of the *aretē* spectrum before passing through the range of animals, humans, and gods, all of which possess excellence.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Inanimate things. *On one side of the aretē spectrum are inanimate or non-living things. Some are excellent things existing in nature or given by the gods, things such as the land or soil, cotton, or a particular fish for food (and so a*

non-living thing). Others are drawn from nature or in some other manner perfected by human beings—things such as certain breads, literary qualities and compositions, or statues (all related, in some sense, to human excellence, but not the perfection of human being itself).

We begin with dirt, with excellent, which is to say fertile, soil or land—something the Greeks lived very close to and knew very well. It was from the soil that they raised everything that helped them survive and thrive.

Herodotus It seems to me that there is in no part of Libya any great excellence for which it should be compared to Asia or Europe—except in the region that is called by the same name as its river, Cinyps. And this region is a match for the best farmland bearing the fruit of Demeter. Nor is it at all similar to the rest of Libya. For the soil is black and well-watered by springs—there’s no fear of drought. . . . Its yield of grain is similar in measure to the land of Babylon. The land inhabited by the Euhesperitae is also good—it yields at the most a hundredfold. But the land of the Cinyps region yields three hundredfold.²

Thucydides The best land [in Greece] was always most subject to this change of inhabitants. Examples are the land now called Thessaly, Boeotia, most of the Peloponnese—though, not including Arcadia—and the best parts of the rest of Hellas. It was thanks to the excellence of the land that some men became more and more powerful. This led to faction and civil war, which was the source of ruin. It also invited invasion.³

Isocrates The Egyptians have come to a perfect state of happiness—regarding the excellence of their land and the extent of their plains, they reap the fruits of the Greek mainland.⁴

Diodorus Siculus Ducetius, after founding Palice and enclosing it with strong walls, portioned out the neighboring countryside in allotments. And it came to pass that this city, because of the excellence of the land and the multitude of colonists, enjoyed a rapid growth.⁵

Diodorus Siculus In Italy the city of Thurii came to be founded for the following reasons. When in former times the Greeks had founded Sybaris in Italy, the city had enjoyed rapid growth because of the excellence of the land. For situated as the city was between two rivers, the Crathis and the Sybaris, from which it derived its name, its inhabitants, who tilled an extensive and fruitful countryside, came to possess great riches.⁶

Dio Chrysostom The Trojans were distinguished not only for their wealth and excellence of soil and number of inhabitants but also because human beings born at Troy were very beautiful, both men and women, and horses were very swift.⁷

Athenaeus of Naucratis Polybius, in his seventh book, says that the inhabitants of Capua in Campania, having become exceedingly rich through the excellence of their soil, fell into habits of luxury and extravagance, exceeding all that is reported of the inhabitants of Crotona or Sybaris.⁸

Next, Herodotus reports the excellence of a “wool” that “grows on wild trees” in India. Though he doesn’t have a word for it, what he means is cotton.

Herodotus The most outlying nations of the world have somehow drawn the finest things as their lot, exactly as Greece has drawn the possession of the best seasons by far. As I said a moment ago, India lies at the world’s most distant eastern limit. And in India all living creatures, both four-footed and flying, are much bigger than those of other lands—except the horses, which are smaller than the Median horses called Nesaeon. Moreover, the gold there, whether dug from the earth or brought down by rivers or obtained as I have described [with the help of ants], is very abundant. There, too, wool more beautiful and excellent than the wool of sheep grows on wild trees. These trees supply the Indians with clothing.⁹

Athenaeus of Naucratis identifies various excellent foods—excellent eels (a delicacy in the ancient world) and the nature

of excellent fish. As explained, they are included here among the non-living because their excellence is discussed relative to their being food rather than living, swimming beings.

Athenaeus of Naucratis I praise all kinds of eels. But by far the best is that eel which fishermen take in the sea opposite to the strait of Rhegium, where you, Messenius, who daily put this food in your mouth, have more of a share of this food than most mortals. Still, no one can deny the greatness of the glory and excellence that belong to Strymonian and Copaic eels, for they are large and wonderfully fat.¹⁰

Athenaeus of Naucratis For fish whose flesh is by nature soft and fat, it is enough to sprinkle them with salt and lightly anoint them with olive oil. I say this because these fish possess their own excellence and delight.¹¹

Finally, we have a few selections that present excellent inanimate human products. In discussing the excellence (or not) of various loaves of bread, Athenaeus of Naucratis claims that oven-baked bread is the best. Otherwise, Dionysius of Halicarnassus hints at the excellent qualities of literature and identifies as excellent the “well-mixed” composition.

Athenaeus of Naucratis And Galen, when we were just about to lay hands on the loaves, said, “We will not begin supper until you have heard what the sons of the Asklēpiadai [i.e., physicians] have said about loaves of bread . . .

“Diphilus the Siphnian, in his treatise on *What is Wholesome to Be Eaten by People in Health and by Invalids*, says, ‘Loaves made of wheat are by far more nutritious and by far more digestible than those made of barley, and are in every respect superior to them . . .’

“Philistion the Locrian says, ‘The loaves made of simlago are superior to those made of groats, as far as their strengthening properties go. And next to them he ranks loaves made of groats, then those made of sifted flour. But the rolls made of bran give a much less wholesome juice, and are by far less nutritious. And all bread is more digestible when eaten hot than cold. . . . Bread baked in the ashes is heavy

and difficult for digestion because it is not baked in an equal manner. . . . But bread baked in the oven has every possible excellence, for it gives a pleasant and wholesome juice, and it is good for the stomach, digestible, and it agrees exceedingly well with everyone—for it never clogs the bowels and never relaxes them too much.’”¹²

Dionysius of Halicarnassus Let no one think me ignorant of the fact that the so-called “pedestrian character” is commonly regarded as a vice in poetry, or attribute to me, of all persons, the folly of ranking any bad quality among the excellences of poetry or prose.¹³

Dionysius of Halicarnassus The third kind of composition is a mean between the two I have already mentioned. I call it “well-mixed” for lack of a proper and better name. It has no form peculiar to itself but is a sort of judicious blend of the two others and a selection from the most effective features of each. This kind, it seems to me, deserves to win the first prize. I say this because it is a sort of mean—and, according to Aristotle and the other philosophers of his school, excellence in life and conduct and skill is a mean.¹⁴

Animals. Next along the aretē spectrum are living things or animals. Since the Greeks dwelled close both to domesticated and wild animals, they had clear views about what was best or excellent among them (recall that aristos, the Greek word for “best,” is related to aretē). In the Iliad, for instance, Homer reports that the eagle has the “best eyesight,” and in the Works and Days, Hesiod declares that nine-year-old oxen are “the best for working.” In the selections that follow, we encounter excellent horses and dogs.

Homer (Achilles is speaking) “You know how much my steeds are better in excellence than all others—for they are immortal. Poseidon gave them to my father Peleus, who in turn gave them to me.”¹⁵

Homer When now the swift horses were completing the last stretch of the course back toward the grey sea, then their excellence was manifest.¹⁶

Homer Of the horses, those of the son of Pheres were by far the best. They were as fast as birds are, the same age and color, and perfectly matched in height. Apollo of the silver bow had bred them in Pereira—both of them mares and dreadful as Ares in battle.¹⁷

Bacchylides of Ceos As yet the golden-haired god Apollo holds dear the city-state of Syracuse and honors Hieron, the city’s lawful ruler. For thanks to the excellence of his swift-footed horses, his praises are sung as a Pythian victor for a third time nearby the navel of the land with high cliffs.¹⁸

Herodotus And everything everywhere was filled with his power. Accordingly, Darius now first produced and set up a carved stone, upon which was cut the figure of a horseman, with this inscription: “Darius, the son of Hystaspes—with the help of the excellence of his horse, and of Oebares, his righthand horseman—won the kingdom of Persia.”¹⁹

Isocrates The man entered a larger number of teams of horses in competition than even the mightiest cities had done. And these teams were so excellent that he won first, second, and third.²⁰

Diodorus Siculus While Alexander was wasting the countryside with fire, . . . some of the local men made a sudden rush and carried off the best one of the royal horses. This horse had come to Alexander as a gift from Demaratus of Corinth and had carried the king in all his battles in Asia. . . . Because of the excellence of this animal, the king was infuriated at his loss and ordered that every tree in the land be felled, while he proclaimed to the local inhabitants through interpreters that if the horse were not returned, they would see the country laid waste to its farthest limit and its people slaughtered to a man. Since he began immediately to carry out these threats, the local inhabitants were terrified and returned the horse and sent with it their costliest gifts. They also sent fifty men to beg forgiveness.²¹

Diodorus Siculus Sopheithes presented to Alexander

many impressive gifts, among them one hundred fifty dogs remarkable for their size, strength, and other advantages. People said that they had a strain of tiger blood. He wanted Alexander to test the excellence of the dogs in action. And so he brought into a ring a full-grown lion and two of the poorest of the dogs. He set these on the lion, and when they were having a hard time of it, he released two others to assist them.²²

Sextus Empiricus Now the dog—that animal upon which, by way of example, we have decided to base our argument—makes a choice for that which is fitting and flees from that which is harmful, in that it hunts after food and avoids a raised whip. . . . Nor is the dog without virtue. I say this because if justice consists in rendering to each his due, then the dog, which welcomes and guards its friends and benefactors but drives off those who are not its friends and who lack justice, cannot be lacking in justice. But if he possesses this virtue, then, since the virtues are interdependent, he also possesses all the other virtues. . . .

That the dog is also brave, we see by the way he repels attacks. He is also intelligent, as Homer testified as well, when he sang how Odysseus went unrecognized by all the people of his own household and was recognized only by the dog Argos. The latter dog was neither deceived by the bodily alterations of the hero nor had he lost his original direct apprehension or apprehending presentation, which he evidently retained better than other men.²³

Homer (describing the homecoming of Odysseus and his encounter with his old dog, Argos) A dog that lay there raised his head and pricked up his ears—Argos, Odysseus’ dog. . . . In days gone by, the young men used to take the dog out to hunt wild goats and deer and hares. But now he lay neglected in the deep dung of mules and cattle . . .

Odysseus looked aside and wiped away a tear. . . . And he questioned the swineherd, saying, “Eumaeus, it is strange that this dog lies here in the dung. His form is beautiful, but I do not clearly know whether he has the speed to match this beauty or whether he is

merely one of those dogs that their masters keep for show.”

In reply, the swineherd Eumaeus said, “. . . If this dog were but in form and in action such as he was when his master left him and went to Troy, you would soon be amazed at seeing his speed and his strength. No wild creature that he pursued in the depths of the thick wood could escape him. And he knew well how to track them. But now he’s in misery.”²⁴

Human beings. *After non-human animals (living things) on the aretē spectrum, come human beings. True, for the Greeks, humans are animals or living beings. Even so, they are different from the animals we’ve already encountered (dogs, horses, and the like). If we follow Aristotle and other philosophers, they are so in that they are “rational animals” rather than ones that live according to “impulse” alone.*

In the first selection, Xenophon tells us that the poetry of Theognis of Megara was about human excellence.

Xenophon The subject matter of this poet Theognis is about nothing other than human excellence and non-excellence. The poem is a written speech about human beings, just as if a horseman were to write about horsemanship.²⁵

With the next statement of Meno, who was a well-to-do man from Thessaly and a budding philosopher, we learn that human virtue varies—that men and women and the various stations of life have different virtues.

Plato (Socrates and Meno are conversing about virtue; Meno offers his view) Socrates: “Tell me, what is your own account of virtue?” . . .

Meno: “No problem, Socrates. First, if you want to look at the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man’s virtue is this: that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman’s virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors, and obeying her husband. And

the child has another virtue—one for the female and one for the male. And there is another for elderly men. And one, if you like, for freemen, and yet another for slaves. And there are very many other virtues besides, so that one cannot be at a loss to explain what virtue is—for it is according to each activity and age that every one of us, in whatever we do, has his virtue. And as I understand it, Socrates, the same also holds for vice.”²⁶

Others also contemplated how excellence shifts, or how there are different excellences, through human life. The statesman Solon of Athens, for example, wrote a poem dividing the life of a man into ten stages, each lasting seven years, some possessing specific excellences. With others, we gain an idea of what excellence is through the course of human life.

Solon of Athens In the fourth hebdomad, everyone reaches the peak of strength that is the mark of excellence. . . .

In the seventh and eighth hebdomads, he is by far the best in mind and the use of language—this for a total of fourteen years.

In the ninth portion, he is still able and strong enough, but his use of language and wisdom have declined from their peak excellence.²⁷

Euripides (the Chorus is speaking) “If the gods had demonstrated intelligence and wisdom as we men understand them, men would have twice experienced youth, a visible mark of excellence.”²⁸

Diodorus Siculus Alexander called the boy to him and treated him with affection. And when he saw that he was fearless and not at all terrified, he remarked to Hephaestion that at six years of age the boy showed an excellence beyond his years and was much better than his father.²⁹

Euripides “There are three virtues that you must practice, my child. Honor the gods, your parents, and the common laws of Greece. In doing so, you will always have a noble garland of glory and reputation.”³⁰

Next, we learn how the excellence or virtue of women is the same—or not—as that of men. A few selections list details regarding these excellences. For specific examples of excellent women, see 6, “Models of Aretē.”

Diogenes Laertius (the Cynic philosopher Antisthenes is speaking) “Virtue is the same for a woman as it is for a man.”³¹

Julian the emperor Now I would judge it strange indeed if we were eager to applaud men who are noble and good and not judge it worthwhile to give our tribute of praise to a good woman, supposing, as we do, that virtue is the attribute of women no less than of men.³²

Diodorus Siculus It is proper that excellence be honored—also when it is exhibited by women.³³

Thucydides (the Athenian statesman Pericles is speaking) “If I must say anything about the excellence of women to those of you who will now be widows, it will be included in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character. And greatest will be your glory who is least talked about among the men, whether for excellence or for something blameworthy.”³⁴

Julian the emperor Homer was not ashamed to praise Penelope and the wife of Alcinous and other women of exceptional goodness, or even those whose claim to excellence was slight. No—nor did Penelope fail to obtain her share of praise for this very thing.³⁵

Euripides (Andromache is speaking to Hermione) “It is not because my drugs that your husband despises you. No, it is because you are unfriendly and useless to live with. But this is also a love-charm. Women do not delight their husbands with beauty but with excellences.”³⁶

Athenaeus of Naucratis Bards in those days were sensible and self-controlled, cultivating a disposition like that of philosophers. Accordingly, Agamemnon leaves his bard as the guardian and counselor to his wife Clytemnestra. The bard, going through all the

excellences of women, endeavored to inspire her with a love for honor in nobility and goodness.³⁷

Lucian of Samosata Where perfection of the body goes hand in hand with soul virtue, I maintain that there alone is true beauty. I could show you many a woman whose outward loveliness is marred by what is within—who has but to open her lips and beauty stands revealed a faded, withered thing, the unlovely handmaid of that odious mistress, her soul. Such women are like Egyptian temples. The shrine is beautiful and big, built with costly stone, decked out with gilding and painting, but seek the god within and you find an ape, a bird, a goat, a cat. This same thing is true for so many women! Beauty unadorned is not enough. And her true adornments are not clothing of purple and necklaces, but those I mentioned before—excellence, moderation, equity, humanity, and anything like these.³⁸

From Homer we learn that the loss of liberty—when one is enslaved—entails a loss of excellence.

Homer (Eumaeus is speaking) “Slaves, when their masters lose power, are no longer interested thereafter in doing honest service. I know this because Zeus, whose voice is carried afar, takes away half the excellence of a man when he is enslaved.”³⁹

In the final selections having to do with human excellence on the aretē spectrum, we encounter various groupings of excellent human beings—cooks, artists, rowing men, barbarians and Greeks, and, among the Greeks, Athenians, Lacedaemonians (Spartans), and Syracusans.

Athenaeus of Naucratis But Euphron, whom I mentioned a little while ago . . . in his play called the *Brothers*, represented a certain cook as a well-educated man of extensive learning, and enumerated all the artists before his time, and mentioned what particular excellence each of them had, and what he surpassed the rest in.⁴⁰

Diodorus Siculus And Cimon, taking the fleet that had been equipped with excellent rowing men and

abundant supplies, sailed to Cyprus.⁴¹

Philostratus the Athenian Homer took the story of the Trojan War as his subject, in which fortune brought together the excellences of the Greeks and the barbarians.⁴²

Herodotus Among the Greeks, the Tegeans and Athenians conducted themselves nobly, but the Lacedaemonians surpassed all in excellence.⁴³

Diodorus Siculus The Athenians fell back to the Lacedaemonians and joined them in assaulting the Theban walls. They did so against those Persians who had taken refuge within. Both sides struggled greatly—the barbarians fighting bravely from their fortified positions and the Greeks storming the wooden walls. And many were wounded as they fought on desperately. And not a few were also slain by the many missiles. And these courageously submitted to death. Still, the powerful Greek attack could not be resisted—neither by the barbarian’s wall nor by their great number. But the Greeks forced all resistance to give way. This was so because the leading Greeks were competing with each other—the Lacedaemonians and the Athenians. And both were buoyed up thanks to their former victories and to the confidence they had in their own excellence.⁴⁴

Diodorus Siculus Elated by his good fortune, the Spartan man Pausanias came to despise the Lacedaemonian training and way of life. So, he began to copy the Persians in their license and luxury—the very man who least of all had any reason to esteem the customs of the barbarians. I say this because he had not learned about their ways from others, but in person he had been exposed to them and had tried them, and he was aware of how greatly superior his ancestor’s way of life was relative to excellence compared with the luxury of the Persians.⁴⁵

Thucydides (Athenian envoys are speaking) “The Lacedaemonians, when their own interests or their own land’s laws are in question, are the most excellent men alive. Regarding their behavior toward others, a good

deal may be said. But no clearer idea of their conduct could be given than by briefly stating that of all the men we know, they are the most conspicuous in acknowledging that, on the one hand, the noble is whatever is pleasant or agreeable, and that, on the other hand, the just is whatever is expedient or useful.”⁴⁶

Thucydides (the Athenian statesman Nicias is speaking) “Remember that the Lacedaemonians are sensitive to their own disgrace. Their sole thought now is how they might find a way, if possible, to make us fall, thereby repairing the harm that has come to their own reputation, given how much and for how long they have trained to win their reputation for excellence.”⁴⁷

Diodorus Siculus Now among the Athenians, each citizen was required to write on a broken piece of ceramics the name of the man who, in his view, was most able through his influence to tyrannize over his fellow citizens. Among the Syracusans, by contrast, the name of the most influential citizen was written on an olive leaf, and when the leaves were counted, the man who received the largest number of leaves had to go into exile for five years. They thought that they would lessen the pride of the strongest men in these two cities. . . .

This legal custom remained in place among the Athenians for a long time. But among the Syracusans it was soon repealed for the following reasons. They did so because the greatest, most influential men were being sent into exile—those who were most highly educated and refined, and, thus, those who were able, because of their own excellence, to fix many things for the community. Instead, these men were missing in action relative to the business of the people. They were taking care of their own wealth and leaning toward soft living. Meanwhile, the basest, most worthless citizens were giving their attention to public affairs and urging on the many to disorder and revolution.⁴⁸

The gods or divine excellence. *Lastly, and perhaps most excellent on the aretē spectrum, are the gods. The notion of excellence or virtue is not usually paired with the gods in non-philosophical Greek literature.*⁴⁹ *Still, the idea that the gods are by nature excellent or virtuous was common—or,*

READING 2 ▪ THE ARETĒ SPECTRUM – FROM INANIMATE TO DIVINE ARETĒ

at very least, common was the idea that they should be so, even when not.⁵⁰ The following selections show both.

Homer (*Phoenix is speaking*) “You must conquer your great anger, Achilles. There’s no need to have such a pitiless heart. No—even the gods are willing to bend, those whose excellence and honor and might are greater than ours.”⁵¹

Isocrates Now I, for my part, think that not only the gods but also their offspring have no share in any vice. Rather, they themselves are by nature endowed with all the virtues and have become for all mankind guides and teachers of the most honorable conduct.⁵²

Epicurus The gods always receive those men who are like them since they make every virtue their own, while rejecting everything that does not belong to them.⁵³

Euripides (*Amphitryon is speaking, chastising Zeus for his apparent lack of aretē*) “Zeus, in vain did I get you to share my wife. In vain did I call you my son’s partner. Rather, it seems you are less a friend than you pretended to be. So it is that even though you are a great god, I have prevailed over you in excellence since I have not deserted the children of Heracles. But you who know how to sleep in another bed secretly, you who know how to take the wife of another man without his permission, you do not know how to help and save your friends! Either you are some ignorant god, or you are unjust by nature.”⁵⁴

Euripides (*Ion is speaking, encouraging Apollo to “chase after excellence”*) “But I must admonish Phoebus Apollo. What is the state of his mind? Does he rape virgins by strength? Does he engender children only

to leave them to die? Let me tell you—don’t do it anymore! Rather, since you have power, chase after excellence. I say this because if any mortal man is bad, the gods punish him. How then is it just for you to write laws for mortals, even though you yourselves are guilty of injustice? And if you make us humans pay for rape, then you gods—Apollo, Poseidon, and Zeus—you will empty your temple treasuries in paying for your crimes, for you unjustly pursue your pleasures so eagerly and without foresight. Therefore, it is not right to speak badly about men—if, that is, we are merely imitating what the gods present as noble. Rather, we should speak this way about the ones who taught us these things.”⁵⁵

We finish with two New Testament passages (both Greek, albeit Christian, literature) that pair aretē with God, as well as one that calls on humans to cultivate aretē.

St. Peter You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people—this so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one (God) who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.⁵⁶

St. Peter God’s power has given us everything necessary for life and piety through the full knowledge of the one who has called us by his own glory and virtue. Through these he has given us his precious and most magnificent promises so that you may become a partner in the divine nature after escaping the corruption engendered by worldly desire. For this reason, earnestly make every effort to add virtue to your faith. And to virtue, add knowledge. And to knowledge, self-control. And to self-control, patient endurance. And to patient endurance, piety. And to piety, brotherly love. And to brotherly love, unconditional love.⁵⁷

So ends Reading 2. See you in Reading 3, “Plato & Socrates.”

NOTES

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.90.

² Herodotus, *Histories* 4.198. The Cinyps today is the Wadi Ka’am in Libya. For another example of excellent soil or land in Herodotus, see *ibid.*, 7.5, which reads: “After Darius’ death, the royal power descended to his son Xerxes. Now Xerxes was at

first by no means eager to march against Hellas—rather, it was against Egypt that he mustered his army. But Mardonius, the son of Gobryas, . . . was with the king and had more influence with him than any other Persian. He argued as follows: ‘Master, it is not fitting that the Athenians should go unpunished for their deeds—not after all the evil they have done to the Persians. For now you should do what you have in hand. Then, when you have tamed the insolence of Egypt, lead your armies against Athens so that you may have fair fame among men, and so that others may be wary about invading your realm in the future.’ This argument was for vengeance. But he kept adding that Europe was an extremely beautiful land, one that bore all kinds of orchard trees, a land of highest excellence, worthy of no mortal master but the king.”

³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 1.2. The explanation is given to explain why Attica, where Athens is located, had been relatively stable—thanks to its “thin or poor soil.”

⁴ Isocrates, *Busiris* 11.14.

⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 11.90.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.9.1-2.

⁷ Dio Chrysostom, *First Tarsic* 33.21.

⁸ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.36.

⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.106. For the gold and the help of the ants, see *ibid.*, 3.102.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.53. “Best” here is the superlative form of *kratos*, a word that generally means “strength” and thus “strong,” but applied to things it carries the connotation of “best, most excellent.”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.117.

¹² Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 3.83.

¹³ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Arrangement of Words* 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24. For Aristotle, “the mean” is that which comes between two extremes, a deficiency and an excess. For more, see 9, “Aristotle.”

¹⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 23.276-278.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.373-375.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.763-767. Recall that “best” is the Greek *aristos*, a word etymologically related to *aretē*.

¹⁸ Bacchylides of Ceos, *Victory Ode* 4.2-6.

¹⁹ Herodotus, *Histories* 3.88.

²⁰ Isocrates, *On the Team of Horses* 16.34. The “man” was Alcibiades.

²¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 17.76.7-8.

²² Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 17.92.1-2. What happens? In short, the four “excellent” dogs defeat the lion.

²³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.66-68. Sextus Empiricus, of the Pyrrhonist or Skeptical school of philosophy, makes these points only to argue against the “dogmatist” (in this case, “Stoic”) position that there is a significant difference between human beings and “the so-called irrational animals,” such as dogs. We give *aretē* as virtue rather than excellence because the general point is about human virtue.

²⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* 17.291-318. Though the specific term *aretē* does not appear in the text, its every mark is manifest. Speed and strength and skill in the hunt make for an excellent dog. Argos was beautiful, the best of dogs.

²⁵ Testimony regarding the poet Theognis of Megara, in Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.29.53. We do not know if this Xenophon is Xenophon of Athens, the statesman and author, or another commentator.

²⁶ Plato, *Meno* 71d-72a.

²⁷ Solon in Philo, *On the Creation of the World* 104. A hebdomad is a group of seven, in this case a period of seven years. Again, “best” is the Greek *aristos*, a word etymologically related to *aretē*.

²⁸ Euripides, *Heraclides* 655-658.

²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 17.38.2.

³⁰ Euripides, fragment from *Heraclidae*. Modified from Arthur W.H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960; reprint 1975), 176.

³¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 6.12.

³² Julian, *Panegyric on the Empress Eusebia, Oration III* 104b.

³³ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 10.24.2.

³⁴ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.45.

³⁵ Julian, *Panegyric on the Empress Eusebia, Oration III* 104c.

READING 2 ▪ THE ARETĒ SPECTRUM – FROM INANIMATE TO DIVINE ARETĒ

³⁶ Euripides, *Andromache* 205-208.

³⁷ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.24.

³⁸ Lucian of Samosata, *Imagines* 11.

³⁹ Homer, *Odyssey* 17.320-323.

⁴⁰ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 9.24.

⁴¹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 12.3.2.

⁴² Philostratus the Athenian, *Heroicus* 692.

⁴³ Herodotus, *Histories* 9.71.

⁴⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 11.32.4.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.46.3.

⁴⁶ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 5.105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.11.

⁴⁸ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 11.87.1-4. The Athenians called this means of exiling strong and influential men “ostracism” from the Greek *ostrakon* (potsherd) whereas the Syracusans called it “petalism” from the Greek *petalon* (leaf).

⁴⁹ In philosophical literature, it is often recognized that the gods—or God—are beyond virtue. For example, Aristotle states, “For there is no such thing as virtue in the case of a god” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1.1).

⁵⁰ Greeks such as the Presocratic Xenophanes and later Plato (in the guise of Socrates) criticized the way the gods were depicted in much of early Greek literature, namely in Homer’s and Hesiod’s poems (much as Euripides does in this section through *Amphitryon* and *Ion*). For them, the gods are naturally good or excellent. Later philosophers and commentators attempted to explain the vicious behavior of the gods in Homer’s and Hesiod’s poems by means of allegorical interpretations.

⁵¹ Homer, *Iliad* 9.496-498.

⁵² Isocrates, *Busiris* 11.41-42.

⁵³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 10.124 (*Letter to Menoeceus*).

⁵⁴ Euripides, *Heracles* 339-347.

⁵⁵ Euripides, *Ion* 436-451.

⁵⁶ 1 Peter 2.9. Although this is Christian literature (though written in Greek) about the God of Christians (judged to be the one and only God), it nevertheless tells us something about what the broader Greek world was thinking about divine excellence or virtue—at the very least, the idea that God possesses excellences or virtues (the Greek is plural—*aretai*).

⁵⁷ 2 Peter 1.3-7. For why this selection is included, see the note above regarding 1 Peter 2.9. Otherwise, the passage is valuable in that it repeats many qualities or virtues (particularly knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, piety, and brotherly love) that had long been considered virtues by the ancient Greeks.

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You’ll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. **Do you want to support the Cave’s mission?** Let’s talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

“Virtue is a kind of health and beauty and good condition of the soul.”—Plato

“Virtue is a weapon that cannot be taken away.”—Antisthenes

“Happiness is an activity of the soul that accords with perfect virtue.”—Aristotle

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

