

Aretē: Excellence or Virtue

Reading 2 – Determining the Goal – *Aretē* as the *Telos* of Life

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Determining the Goal – *Aretē* as the *Telos* of Life

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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 *aretē* (excellence or virtue) being the goal (*telos*) of life.

WHAT IS THE goal of life? Or goals? What is the overall objective? Is there such? What target or targets should we shoot for? As they are for us, these were vital questions for the ancient Greeks, posed in their quest to figure out how best to live.

The central Greek term of their quest was *telos*, a word that meant not only "goal," "objective," and "target" but also "end," "chief matter," and "good." The *telos* of life, then, was what people pursued; it was the most important thing to do or get in life, that which would make life worthwhile or good, and, ac-

cording to some, happy or blessed.

Nearly all ancient Greek philosophers held that *aretē*, excellence or moral virtue, was the goal of life, the highest good. An exception was Epicurus, who taught only that virtue was the means to pleasure, the actual goal of life. Athenaeus of Naucratis, for instance, reports that Epicurus, in his work *On the Goal of Life*, taught that one "should . . . honor that which is morally noble and the virtues and everything like that if they produce pleasure. But if they do not produce pleasure, then we should have nothing to do

with them.”¹ Still, even Epicurus’ intended meaning is not entirely clear.²

The question remains: what about other ancient Greek writers and thinkers? The truth is that, aside from the philosophers, no one from Homer on clearly stated that “the goal of life is *aretē*.” Nevertheless, it is easy to detect the general conclusion.

In the following selections, we see that the Greeks by and large judged *aretē* to be the goal of life. It was the one good for which no amount of toil was too great, that for which they gave everything to achieve. It was what people hoped for, strove and prayed for; it was what they admired, honored, and rewarded. Finally, it was, they believed, that which outlasted the death of the body in the form of everlasting glory.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

The following selections are mostly presented chronologically. They are passages from the late eighth century BC (Homer and Hesiod) to the sixth century AD (the Byzantine historian Procopius).

*In the first few selections from Homer, *aretē* (excellence) is a gift to pray for (for others). It is battle excellence, the excellence of the hero or warrior, the “might and manhood” that reveal “the best of men.” As such, it is the absence of shame. It is that for which a father earnestly prays for his son, that which a son must be—outstanding, the best—when around others.*

Homer (Odysseus is speaking to the Phaeacians) “As for those of you staying here, may you happily delight your wedded wives and children, and may the gods give you every kind of excellence, and may misfortune be absent from among the people.”³

Homer (Odysseus, Telemachus, and Laertes are speaking) And at once Odysseus said to Telemachus, his dear son, “Having come to battle where the best of men are separated in distinction from the rest, now you will learn never to shame your family line, for we have always excelled in might and manhood throughout all the land.”

In turn mindful Telemachus answered him, “If you wish, dear father, you will see me—given my present spirit—bring no shame on the family line, as you say.”

That’s what Telemachus said, and glad, Laertes spoke, saying, “What kind of day is this for me, dear gods? I absolutely rejoice! My son and my son’s son are battling over excellence!”⁴

Homer (Glaucus is speaking) “My father sent me to Troy and insistently ordered me to always be the best and to stand out among other men and not dishonor or shame the family of my fathers who were the best in Ephyre and in wide Lydia.”⁵

Homer (Nestor is speaking) “Old Peleus enjoined his child Achilles to always be the best and to stand out among other men.”⁶

Homer (Hector is praying for his son, indicating the nature of an excellent man) After playing with his son As-tyanax like this, Hector spoke in prayer to Zeus and all the gods. “Zeus and the other gods, grant that this child, my boy, may be as I am. Make him outstanding among all the Trojan men, preeminent in forceful strength and noble bravery, and may he powerfully rule Ilium. And when someday he returns home from battle carrying the gory spoils of the enemy man he has slaughtered—the dead man’s shield and armor—may some man say, ‘He’s even better than his father was!’ And let his mother rejoice and delight in her heart!”⁷

*For Hesiod, *aretē* is the excellence of the farmer. It is the destination toward which the path of an ordered life consisting of hard and constant work leads. It is success in terms of prosperity, honor, and happiness (eudaimonia).*

*Hesiod Listen, Perses, you big fool. I will proclaim all this noble knowledge for you. It is easy to grab at Deficiency (*Kakotēs*). It is there in abundance for you. The way is smooth to her, and she dwells very near to you. But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Excellence (*Aretē*). The path to her is long and steep. And so*

it is rough-going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy.⁸

One thousand years later, St. Basil the Great recognizes Hesiod's call to the goal of aretē in his work on How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature. Interestingly, he observes that "everyone is singing" these lines of Hesiod about aretē—though note his shift to moral virtue.

Basil the Great 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."⁹

In the following Homeric Hymns, we hear the singer praying for aretē along with "happy prosperity" (olbos—another Greek term for happiness).

Hymn to Heracles Rejoice, lord, son of Zeus, and give me both excellence and happy prosperity.¹⁰

Hymn to Hephaestus Be gracious, Hephaestus, and give me both excellence and happy prosperity.¹¹

For the Spartan Tyrtaeus, aretē is the "best prize among human beings," which is to say it is the most important goal of life, "the most beautiful for a young man to carry off." As with Homer, aretē is battle excellence. Most importantly, it is persistence in the fight, "never relaxing from war."

Tyrtaeus of Sparta This is excellence, the best prize among human beings, the most beautiful for a young man to carry off. . . . This is the excellence that each man should now aspire to in his spirit, never relaxing from war.¹²

A millennium on, the general Belisarius echoes the view of Homer, Tyrtaeus, and others—that one should live up to and fight for the standard of excellence.

Procopius (the general Belisarius is speaking to his army

before battle) "And let the strongest motive that rouses men come to your minds, namely, pride in past achievements. For it is a shame, for those at least who have reason, to fall short of one's own self and to be found inferior to one's own standard of excellence."¹³

Solon and Cleobulus, two of the seven wise men of ancient Greece, both highly valued and pursued aretē—every excellence.

Diodorus Siculus In wisdom and learning, Solon surpassed all the men of his time. Being by nature far superior in excellence relative to the rest of men, he diligently cultivated excellence that wins applause—for he devoted much time to every branch of knowledge and became practiced in every kind of excellence.¹⁴

Diogenes Laertius Cleobulus advised men to practice bodily exercise . . . and to be friendly to excellence and hostile to deficiency.¹⁵

For the Greeks, to be wise was, in some sense, to be excellent, which was praiseworthy.

Diogenes Laertius The story told by Andron . . . that the Argives offered a tripod as a prize for excellence to the wisest of the Greeks.¹⁶

The following poets, all in their own way, promote aretē as a significant goal of life—the thing to keep in mind, strive for, and leave behind as a memorial. It is a secure foundation and one's glory.

Xenophanes of Colophon It is fitting to praise that one of men who, when drinking, shows and proclaims noble things, so that there is the memory of excellence—a rope pulling us thereto.¹⁷

Theognis of Megara Wear yourself out for the sake of excellence. And, The great glory of excellence will never be destroyed. And, Excellence and beauty accompany few men. Happy the one who is allotted both of these.¹⁸

Simonides of Ceos These men once lost their shining youth at Eurymedon River . . . when they perished, they left behind the noblest memorial of their excellence.¹⁹

Phocylides Seek after the means of life, and whenever you already have life, then seek after excellence.²⁰

Bacchylides of Ceos I declare—and I will declare—that the greatest glory is to possess excellence. *And*, The light of a man's excellence is not dimmed with the demise of his body.²¹

Sophocles The only secure acquisitions are those tied to excellence.²²

For the historian Thucydides (or the speakers whose speech he records), bravery and excellence go hand in hand, both deserving to be honored with prizes.

Thucydides (the Peloponnesian commanders are speaking) “The brave will be honored with the appropriate prizes for excellence.”²³

From the historian Herodotus, we learn that the Greeks competed in the Olympic games for the sake of excellence rather than for any other prize.

Herodotus Bringing these men into the king's presence, the Persians inquired of them what the Greeks were doing. . . . When the Arcadians told them that the Greeks were holding the Olympic games and viewing athletic contests and horse races, the king asked about the prize on offer for which they competed. They told him about the crown of olive leaves that was given to the victor. Then Tigranes, the son of Artabanus, said something that was most noble—even though the king judged him a coward for it. When he heard that the prize was not money but a crown, he could not keep quiet, but said, “Mardonius! What kind of men are these that you have pitted us against? It is not for money that they compete but for excellence!” This is what he said.²⁴

For the Athenian orator Isocrates, aretē is the goal of education and training. As such, it is good to listen to stories about “the excellences of men.” Aretē is that which abides, even unto old age.

Isocrates The fact, then, that our city was governed in those times better than the rest of the world I would justly credit to her kings, of whom I spoke a moment ago. For it was they who trained the multitude in the ways of excellence.²⁵

Isocrates Most of all I am concerned with those who, in preference to any other, will gladly listen to a discourse which celebrates the excellences of men and the ways of a well-governed state.²⁶

Isocrates Excellence, when it grows up with us in our hearts without alloy, is the one possession that abides with us in old age.²⁷

*With the historian Diodorus Siculus (of Sicily), we observe in his introduction to the Library what was a common concern for ancient historians—to provide examples of aretē and its opposite so that men and women would behave excellently. The point is the same as we find in Isocrates' above remark about “discourses which celebrate the excellences of men.” But we could also mention other ancient writers (Herodotus, Polybius, Plutarch, and the Roman historian Livy) who were all, to one degree or another, interested in highlighting the excellent relative to the not-so-excellent.*²⁸

Diodorus Siculus Throughout our entire treatise . . . we have justly praised good men for their noble deeds and criticized base men whenever they have missed the mark. We believe that, by this means, we will lead men, whose nature fortunately inclines them to excellence, to undertake, because of the immortality that fame and reputation accords them, the noblest deeds, whereas by appropriate criticism we will turn men of the opposite character from their impulse to vice.²⁹

The final selections present the views of philosophers and the ancient schools of philosophy. Up to this point we've mostly given aretē as “excellence.” Now, with the philosophers, we

begin to give “virtue” since their concern was more for a moral or ethical excellence.

Though chronologically later than the founding of the major schools of philosophy, Potamo of Alexandria indicates that all the schools held that aretē is the telos (end or goal) of “all actions” in life. We see this with the Academy (Plato’s school), the Cynics, the Lyceum (Aristotle’s school), and the Porch (the Stoics). Aretē was the goal for all but the school of Epicurus, known as the Garden, and the Skeptics (the Pyrrhonists).

In the following selections we hear from or about Socrates, Diotima (one of Socrates’ teachers), Plato, Antisthenes the Cynic, Aristotle, Zeno of Citium (the founder of Stoicism), Apollonius of Tyana (more a religious figure), Potamo of Alexandria (founder of an Eclectic school of philosophy), Galen (the renowned medical theorist, also a philosopher), Clement of Alexandria (a Christian theologian and Greek-influenced philosopher), and Plotinus (the founder of Neoplatonism).

Diogenes Laertius Not long ago an Eclectic school was introduced by Potamo of Alexandria, who made a selection from the tenets of all the existing schools. As he himself states in his *Elements of Philosophy*, . . . the end to which he refers all actions is a life made perfect in all virtue.”³⁰

Xenophon Socrates openly tried to reform young men and exhorted them to desire the most noble and magnificent virtue by which men prosper in public life and in their homes.³¹

Xenophon Socrates put a stop to these vices [impiety, lawlessness, gluttony, sexual lust, a lack of self-control] in many by making them long for virtue, and by giving them the hope that with care they might be good and noble men.³²

Julian the emperor Socrates the Athenian . . . praised whatever ruler he knew to delight in virtue, and to cherish courage with moderation, and to love practical wisdom with justice.³³

Plato (Diotima is speaking to Socrates) “Consider well,”

she said, “that it is only there with beauty itself that it will happen to him. . . . He gives birth to true virtue inasmuch as he grasps the truth—what is real and actual. So, when this man has produced true virtue, nourishing it and letting it grow, he becomes dear to the gods. And if ever immortality is granted to humans, that man, above all others, will be immortal.”³⁴

Diogenes Laertius Plato held that the goal of life is to become god-like, and that virtue is sufficient in itself for happiness.³⁵

Diogenes Laertius The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Antisthenes says as much in his *Heracles*—just like the Stoics. . . . Therefore, some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue. Zeno of Citium [the founder of Stoicism] passed his own life in this way.³⁶

Aristotle The human good, then, is the activity of the soul that accords with virtue. And if there happens to be more than one human virtue, then it is that activity which accords with the best and most complete or perfect virtue.³⁷

Athenaeus of Naucratis (from a hymn to virtue attributed to Aristotle) O virtue, never but by much labor won, noblest object of all human life.³⁸

Diogenes Laertius In his work *On the Nature of Man*, Zeno [of Citium] was the first to say that the end or goal of life is to live in accord with nature, which is the same as living in accord with virtue, since nature leads us toward virtue.³⁹

Diogenes Laertius The epigrammatist Athenaeus speaks of all the Stoics in common as follows: “You who are acquainted with the words of the Stoic Porch. You who have committed to your divine books the best of human teachings, that virtue of the soul is the only good. Her decrees alone protect the lives of men and cities. But those other men who declare the goal of life is the enjoyment of the flesh are ruined by one of the Muses, the daughters of Memory.”⁴⁰

Philostratus the Athenian (Apollonius of Tyana is speaking) “The gods care most for those who pursue philosophy together with virtue.”⁴¹

Diogenes Laertius A life perfected by every virtue is the end to which Potamo of Alexandria refers every action.⁴²

Galen I especially favor that exercise which promotes sufficient health for the body, harmonious development of its parts, and virtue in the spirit.⁴³

Clement of Alexandria God is always urging us on to virtue.⁴⁴

Plotinus Since evils are here in this realm, and since these evils “prowl about this realm by necessity,” and since the soul wishes to flee these evils, then “we must flee from this realm.” But what is the nature of this flight we must take? Plato says that it is in becoming like god—like the divinity. And this, he says, is found if one “is becoming just and holy, and in one who is beginning to live by means of practical wisdom”—which is to say the whole of virtue.⁴⁵

So ends Reading 2. **See you in Reading 3, “The Aretē Spectrum—from Inanimate to Divine Aretē.”**

NOTES

¹ Athenaeus of Naucratis, *Deipnosophists* 12.67. For the same lines, see also 7.11.

² It is unclear because Epicurus otherwise equates virtue with living pleasantly. Therefore, it seems that one *cannot* live pleasantly—with pleasure—without living virtuously. For Epicurus’ position, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 10.32. From now on, *Lives*.

³ Homer, *Odyssey* 13.44-46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.505-515.

⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 6.207-210. Recall that “best” is the Greek *aristos*, a word etymologically related to *aretē*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.783-784. Again, “best” is the Greek *aristos*, a word etymologically related to *aretē*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.475-481. Recall from the Introduction that the root word of “excellence” is related to a “hill” that rises above the flatlands; therefore, to be “outstanding” or “preeminent” (as Hector prays for his son) is to be excellent.

⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days* 286-292. “Excellence” (*Aretē*) could have been given as “Success.” If Homer sings about the path of the heroic warrior, Hesiod describes the way of the heroic farmer.

⁹ Basil the Great, *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature* 5.3, from *The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2020), 53. Lilah Grace Canevaro reports that this one Hesiodic 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.

¹⁰ *Homeric Hymn 15 to Heracles* 9.

¹¹ *Homeric Hymn 20 to Hephaestus* 8.

¹² Tyrtaeus of Sparta, in Stobaeus, *Anthology* 4.10.1.

¹³ Procopius, *History* 4.1.17.

¹⁴ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 9.1.1.

¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 1.92.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.30.

¹⁷ Xenophanes of Colophon, in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 11.462c.

¹⁸ Theognis of Megara 465; 867; 933-934.

¹⁹ Simonides of Ceos, in *Palatine Anthology* 7.258.

²⁰ Phocylides, in Alexander of Aphrodisias on Aristotle, *Topica* 3.118a6.

²¹ Bacchylides, *Victory Ode* 1.159-160; 3.90-91. See also 1.181-184 in which Bacchylides declares how a man must obtain excellence with much toil, yet in the end, even after the man dies, he has much glory.

²² Sophocles, *Eriphyle* fragment 201d.

²³ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.87.

- ²⁴ Herodotus, *Histories* 8.26.
²⁵ Isocrates, *Panathenaicus* 12.138.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.136.
²⁷ Isocrates, *To Demonicus* 1.7.
²⁸ For “Models of Aretē,” see Chapter 6.
²⁹ Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 15.1.1.
³⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 1.Prologue.21.
³¹ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 1.2.64.
³² *Ibid.*, 1.2.2.
³³ Julian the emperor, *The Heroic Deeds of Emperor Constantius, or On Kingship, Oration II* 79.
³⁴ Plato, *Symposium* 212a.
³⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 3.78.
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.104.
³⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.7.15-16 (1098a).
³⁸ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 15.1.
³⁹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.87.
⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.30.
⁴¹ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 2.39.
⁴² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 1.21.
⁴³ Galen, *On Exercise with the Small Ball*. Translation from Stephen G. Miller, *Aretē: Greek Sports from Ancient Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 123.
⁴⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, Chapter 1.
⁴⁵ Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.2.1.

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