

HOMERIC SOCIAL VALUES

In recent years there has been considerable interest in Greek social values and much has been written on the subject. One writer in this area is A.W.H. Adkins, whose contributions to the subject include two books, *Merit and Responsibility. A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford, 1960) and *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece* (London, 1972), as well as a number of articles.¹

My own view of Greek social values disagrees totally with that of Adkins, as may be seen in my book *Aristocracy in Greek Society* (London, 1977). In this paper I shall begin by setting out Adkins's received interpretation of Homeric values, with specific reference to the concepts of "moral responsibility" and "justice", and I shall then proceed to give my own interpretation of Homeric social values.

I shall summarise Adkins's views in point form:

1. Adkins maintains that in any society there are two types of values:

"In any society there are activities in which success is of paramount importance; in these, commendation or the reverse is reserved for those who *in fact* succeed or fail. In such activities, what a man intended to do is of little account in estimating his performance. On the other hand, in any society there are also those activities, such as contracts or partnerships, in which men co-operate with one another for a common end. Since the only basis for co-operation is fairness, however interpreted, it is in terms of fairness, or some similar word, that the relation of men who co-operate will be estimated. ... Both complexes evaluate action ... and both have some claim to be termed 'moral', since competition

¹ See especially "Homeric Values and Homeric Society", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 91 (1971) 1-14; and: "Homeric Gods and the Values of Homeric Society", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92 (1972) 1-19.

requires such virtues as courage and endurance. To avoid confusion, the two will be distinguished hereafter as 'competitive' values or excellences and 'co-operative' or 'quiet' values or excellences."²

2. Among the "co-operative" values or excellences is that of *dikaiosune* or "justice", which indeed is regarded by Adkins as the central element of the "co-operative" group of virtues and sometimes even appears to be equated by him with that group as a whole, as, for example, when *dikaiosune* is defined as "the quiet co-operation of one citizen with another".³
3. The chief term of commendation in Homer is the adjective *agathos* ("good") and the abstract noun corresponding to it, *arete* ("goodness" or "excellence"). These terms, according to Adkins, refer specifically and exclusively to the "competitive" excellences and are not concerned with the "co-operative" excellences:

"In the first place, *agathos* has in its normal use no 'quiet' moral connotation. ... What is commended by these terms is firstly military prowess, and the skills which promote success in war, together with that success which, as will be seen, is indistinguishable in Homer from the skills which contribute to it. ... To be *agathos*, one must be brave, skilful, and successful in war and peace; and one must possess the wealth and (in peace) the leisure which are at once the necessary conditions for the development of these skills and the natural reward of their successful employment."⁴

In other words, according to Adkins's view, the criteria of what constituted a "good" man or "good" act in Homeric society were unconnected with moral qualities:

"Such are the implications of the competitive scheme of values. *Moral* responsibility has no place in them; and the

² *Merit and Responsibility*, 6f.

³ *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*, 42.

⁴ *Merit and Responsibility*, 32f.

quieter virtues, in which such responsibility has its place, neither have sufficient attraction to gain a hearing nor are backed by sufficient force to compel one.”⁵

4. In Homeric society, therefore, according to Adkins:

“... there is no earthly sanction to aid the weaker against the stronger, to ensure either just decisions in legal matters, or equitable treatment in general. Yet such aid must be found; and if earthly aid is denied, it is natural to look to the gods. At all events, it is natural to look to the gods if the gods are themselves just; for otherwise there can be no help in Olympus either. This help is doubtful in Homer. Chapter three showed that the gods are believed to endorse the *agathos*-standard; and the gods as portrayed generally in the Homeric poems are far from just.”⁶

In other words, according to Adkins, not only is there no justice or “equitable treatment in general” in Homeric society as portrayed in the epics, but justice and the co-operative excellences in general were not even valued highly as ideals by that society.

5. For Adkins it is precisely these values of “justice” and the other “co-operative” excellences which constitute “moral responsibility”; and, since these “quiet” or “co-operative” values were so little respected by the Greeks, not only in the Homeric epics but right down to the latter part of the fifth century B.C., Adkins concludes that the concept of moral responsibility was essentially absent from Greek thinking until that time. It is this, in fact, which he sees as the main theme of his book *Merit and Responsibility*:

“If we can discover why the concept of moral responsibility is so unimportant to the Greek, we shall go far towards understanding the difference between our moral systems, and discovering the nature of each.”⁷

⁵ *Merit and Responsibility*, 52.

⁶ *Merit and Responsibility*, 62.

⁷ *Merit and Responsibility*, 3.

But what exactly is the meaning of “moral responsibility”? Adkins equates it with the Kantian concept of “duty”, in which the basic moral question to be asked on any given occasion is: “What is my duty in these circumstances?” Adkins maintains that there is no Greek equivalent for the word “duty” in this sense, and, moreover, that the Greeks therefore also lacked the *concept* of “duty”, which in turn explains the lack of importance attached by the Greeks to the concept of “moral responsibility”, which was only fully developed in the writings of Plato and Aristotle.

I shall consider these points one by one in the same order as I have enumerated them.

1. Does it really make any sense to divide values into two groups, “competitive” values or excellences on the one hand and “co-operative” values or excellences on the other? Adkins himself, in the first passage cited from his writings above, gives “contracts or partnerships” as examples of “co-operative activities”.⁸ Yet, though contracts and partnerships are undeniably co-operative ventures, it would be hard to think of them without an element of competition at the same time. Contracts and partnerships are invariably agreements amongst a small number of people and represent co-operation within this small group — but certainly with the world at large. Whether we think of business partnerships, political alliances or even the marriage bond, there is an element of competition as well as one of co-operation present. Commercial partnerships are of course frequently entered into precisely in order to offer fiercer competition to a rival firm or group of companies. In another type of commercial co-operation, such as that of a trade union, the competition is with the employers of labour. In politics, similarly, alliances are forged in order to confront a common enemy with more powerful opposition than would otherwise have been the case. As for marriage, the competition with one’s mother-in-law is just one facet of the relationship — not to mention the competition that so often arises between the two married partners themselves.

It is probably easier to think of competitive activities which contain no element of co-operation than it is to think of co-operative activities without any element of competition. Yet even this is not at all easy.

⁸ *Merit and Responsibility*, 6.

Adkins himself in fact unwittingly reveals just how co-operative the so-called “competitive” virtues were:

“Homeric values, then, are not the result of caprice. In war, the failure of one man may well contribute to the failure of friends: a failure which, in the Homeric world, must result either in slavery or annihilation. Success is so imperative that only results have any value: intentions are unimportant. Similarly, and for similar reasons, it is *aischron* to fail in time of peace to protect one’s family and guests, whatever one’s intentions.”⁹

What Adkins is here describing is supposedly the “competitive” excellences of Homeric society, but, as even Adkins is forced to admit, these values are ultimately socially based: they aim at the defence and protection not only of each individual himself but also of his family, guests and friends, people with whom he is co-operating. Therefore, just as the so-called “co-operative” values were seen to necessitate competition as well, so the so-called “competitive” values are not without their element of co-operation. Indeed, as must now be apparent, it makes little sense to divide values into two categories of “competitive” and “co-operative” excellences.

2. Adkins, as we have seen, having divided virtues or excellences into two categories, “co-operative” and “competitive”, and having informed us that Homeric values are purely of the “competitive” type, then proceeds to inform us that *dikaiosune*, or “justice”, is one of the “co-operative” values. If we accept all these points, then the conclusion is inescapable that *dikaiosune* must be absent from the Homeric conception of virtue.

But, as I have just demonstrated, we cannot accept this chain of argument. Indeed, its first link is faulty to begin with. Secondly, Adkins gives no proper definition of *dikaiosune*. The nearest he gets to defining the term is by equating it with “the quiet co-operation of one citizen with another”.¹⁰ This is a very strange characterisation.¹⁰ On the one

⁹ *Merit and Responsibility*, 35.

¹⁰ *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*, 42.

hand, we are given to understand that *dikaiosune* is one of the so-called “co-operative” values, yet the nearest Adkins gets to a definition of *dikaiosune* equates *dikaiosune* with the whole of the “co-operative” set of values. This betrays fuzzy thinking. And, in any case, Adkins does not give us an adequate definition of his so-called “co-operative” values anyhow, except to associate them with the concept of “fairness”, which he studiously avoids defining.¹¹

Having revealed some structural weaknesses in the underpinnings of Adkins’s argument, we are now ready to assail the argument itself, which is contained in points 3, 4 and 5 above. These will now be discussed together. But first, let us recapitulate Adkins’s argument: *dikaiosune*, being one of the “co-operative” excellences, forms no part of Homeric *arete*, or “virtue”, which is purely of the “competitive” variety. But, if the Homeric heroes lack *dikaiosune*, so do the Homeric gods. And, since *dikaiosune* is identified with “moral responsibility”, which in turn is defined as “duty”, these values are also absent from the Homeric concept of *arete*. Thus Adkins.

It is my contention, however, that Adkins’s views are exactly the opposite of the truth. Not only do I believe that the concept of *dikaiosune* is present in Homer, but that it is the Homeric concept of *arete*, or “virtue”. Moreover, I believe that *dikaiosune* is at the heart of the plots of both Homeric epics.

The *Iliad* opens with the famous quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, which indeed forms the chief theme of the whole poem. Agamemnon’s decision to take Achilles’s captive girl, Briseis, to make up for the loss of his own captive, Chryseis, so incenses Achilles that he withdraws from battle, which in turn results in a series of military setbacks for the Greeks. This in turn impels Patroclus to go into battle wearing Achilles’s distinctive armour, which is the direct cause of Patroclus’s death at the hands of Hector. Such is the grief of Achilles at the death of his friend Patroclus that he is impelled to re-enter the battle in order to avenge Patroclus’s death by killing Hector.

The two turning-points in the *Iliad* are therefore the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon at the beginning and then the death of

¹¹ *Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece*, 42, cf. *Merit and Responsibility*, 37.

Patroclus. Both of these events, as we shall see, are closely bound up with the concepts of *dikaiosune*, moral responsibility and duty.

Achilles makes it quite clear from the outset that his reason for coming to Troy was not because he had any quarrel of his own with the Trojans, but rather out of loyalty to Agamemnon.¹² In other words, Achilles obviously felt a sense of *duty* towards Agamemnon, probably because of Agamemnon's position as supreme overlord of Greece.¹³

The argument between Achilles and Agamemnon over the slave-girl, Briseïs, is nothing other than a conflict over the question of what is right and what is wrong, namely over justice. King Nestor of Pylos, who is clearly meant to be the personification of wisdom and commonsense, puts both contenders in the wrong. Agamemnon, he says, is wrong to take away Achilles's prize, which had been given him by the Greeks as a whole. Achilles, on the other hand, is also wrong for daring to challenge Agamemnon, his superior, in the way that he does.¹⁴ Though Agamemnon in fact rejects Nestor's advice, he nevertheless admits that Nestor has spoken "according to right" — *kata moiran*.¹⁵

Adkins interprets Nestor's advice to Agamemnon as follows:

"That is to say, an *agathos* might well do this (i.e. deprive Achilles of his prize) without ceasing to be an *agathos*, and indeed derives a claim to do it from the fact that he is an *agathos*; but in this case Nestor is begging Agamemnon not to do it."¹⁶

Nestor's exact words to Agamemnon are: "do not, *agathos* though you be, take the girl from him."¹⁷ The implication here is indeed that an *agathos* is normally entitled to more rights than someone who is less *agathos* than himself. In other words, Homeric society does not see people as all enjoying equal rights, but, on the contrary, apportions

¹² *Iliad* I, 149ff.

¹³ This question has been much discussed. See M.T.W. Arnheim, *Aristocracy in Greek Society* (London, 1977) 19ff.

¹⁴ *Iliad* I, 275ff.

¹⁵ *Iliad* I, 286.

¹⁶ *Merit and Responsibility*, 37.

¹⁷ *Iliad* I, 275.

rights to people according to their social status. It is precisely this sort of thing that makes Adkins jump to the conclusion that Homeric society lacks "moral responsibility". What Homeric society lacks is not moral responsibility but merely the *modern* conception of what moral responsibility should be.

The modern view is of course that it is morally wrong to treat people unequally. The Homeric view is that it is morally right to treat people unequally according to their social status, and, indeed, that this inequality is the very foundation-stone of justice.

What Nestor is saying in this particular situation, therefore, is that the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon is actually an exception to the general rule of Homeric justice. In general, Nestor implies, it would be right for Agamemnon to order and for Achilles to obey, in accordance with their respective social statuses but, in the circumstances, he considers it wrong for Agamemnon to act in the way that he is acting, though it would be equally wrong for Achilles to disobey him even though Agamemnon's action was not right.

It may not be altogether coincidental that an episode illustrating the "normal" reflection of social status in moral terms is juxtaposed with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. I refer to the well-known episode of Thersites in Book II of the *Iliad*. Thersites is the only commoner mentioned by name throughout the whole of the *Iliad*. He is also the only "revolutionary" figure in the epic, though he is signally unsuccessful in winning the support of his fellow commoners against the authorities.

The specific question at issue is whether the Greeks should continue to fight in Troy or whether they should return home to Greece. The men are becoming restive and Odysseus is given the task of keeping the peace. He goes around talking to nobles and commoners, officers and men alike. But he adopts a totally different tone in addressing leaders from the tone that he uses on ordinary soldiers. To the leaders he adopts a tone of sweet reasonableness, politely requesting them to sit down and to get their men to do likewise.¹⁸ But any commoner who was found making a noise Odysseus would strike with his sceptre and address in less honeyed words:

¹⁸ *Iliad* II, 188ff.

“Fellow, sit still and listen to the words of others who are better men than you; whereas you are unwarlike and a weakling, neither to be counted in war nor in counsel. In no wise shall we Achaeans all be kings here. No good thing is a multitude of lords; let there be one lord, one king, to whom the son of crooked-counselling Cronos has vouchsafed the sceptre and judgements, that he may take counsel for his people.”¹⁹

This highly stratified view not only of society but also of justice and duty is forcibly brought home to Thersites when he dares to criticise and even mock Agamemnon.²⁰ Odysseus not only threatens Thersites with physical violence but actually inflicts it upon him. But what is perhaps most significant of all is the poet's own attitude towards the whole episode and the attitude which he imputes to the other commoners:

“So spoke Odysseus, and with his staff beat his back and shoulders; and Thersites cowered and a big tear fell from him, and a bloody weal rose up on his back beneath the staff of gold. Then he sat down and fear came upon him, and stung by pain with helpless looks he wiped away the tear. But the Achaeans, sore vexed at heart though they were, broke into a merry laugh at him, and thus would one speak with a glance at his neighbor: ‘Out upon it! Odysseus has truly before now done good deeds without number as leader in good counsel and setting battle in array, but this deed now is by far the best that he has ever done amongst the Argives, seeing that he has made this scurrilous babbler cease from his chattering. Never again will his proud spirit henceforth set him on to rail at kings with words of reviling’.”²¹

It is quite clear from this that Homer himself is on the side of the authorities, on the side of a stratified system of social order and of

¹⁹ *Iliad* II, 200ff.

²⁰ *Iliad* II, 246ff.

²¹ *Iliad* II, 265ff.

justice. He is also intent on persuading his readers that this view was shared by the commoners as well as by the nobles. Hence his restatement after the quoted passage: "So spoke the multitude".²² Thersites alone stands out against the norms of society, but, far from being supported by his fellow commoners, he is ridiculed by them and they take the side of Odysseus and the authorities.

The Thersites episode clearly illustrates the nature of Homeric social and moral values. But the whole plot of the *Iliad* may in fact be seen in these terms. The poem opens with the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, both of whom, as we have already noted, were in the wrong. Agamemnon's punishment is to lose the services of his best warrior and to suffer a number of military setbacks as a result, which eventually brings him round to apologising to Achilles for his initial anger. But Achilles himself is also punished for his improper behavior towards Agamemnon. Through his sulking in his tent the Greeks suffer at the hands of the Trojans, which leads to Patroclus's daring attempt to turn the tide by donning Achilles's own distinctive armour and going into battle. This reckless daring only results in Patroclus's death, which of course is a very serious blow to Achilles himself and one which would not have occurred had not Achilles decided to withdraw from battle after his quarrel with Agamemnon. In the end, therefore, right triumphs. After Patroclus's death Achilles returns to the fray and, by killing Hector, ensures ultimate Greek victory and the recovery of Helen from the Trojans. Similarly, in the *Odyssey* right ultimately triumphs over wrong and good over bad. This applies to individual incidents within the epic as well as to the plot of the poem as a whole. Thus, for example, Polyphemus the Cyclops is clearly placed in the wrong from the beginning. He mocks belief in the gods and shamelessly disobeys the canons of right behavior towards strangers and guests. Odysseus's triumph over him is therefore justified even though it is achieved by means of trickery and at the expense of the Cyclops's single eye.

The plot of the *Odyssey* as a whole revolves around Odysseus's restoration to his home and the denouement of the epic is in his punishment of the suitors for their wrongful behavior towards himself, his wife, his son, his slaves and also their general lack of conformity to

²² *Iliad* II, 278.

the standards required of them, in regard, for example, to their treatment of beggars and suppliants.

In other words, the question of "moral responsibility" or "duty", values which Adkins claims are not of any importance in the Homeric epic, turn out to be at the very centre of these poems. There is hardly an incident of any importance in either of the two epics which is not concerned with this basic question. As an example let us look at the comparatively insignificant incident of Odysseus's reunion with his dog Argos in Book XVII of the *Odyssey*. The story, which is a simple one, is told with a great deal of pathos by Homer. The dog, now old and neglected, has been anxiously awaiting the return of his long-lost master. Argos alone recognizes Odysseus upon his return but is unable to do any more than prick up his ears and wag his tail before expiring.²³ Eumaeus explains the dog's sorry appearance as the result of the neglect of servants in the absence of Odysseus.²⁴

Even in this simple story we are confronted with the question of moral responsibility and duty. Argos the dog shows the requisite loyalty towards his master and therefore becomes an object of admiration and pathos. The slaves who have neglected him have failed in *their* duty and must therefore be punished.

Adkins admits that right triumphs in both Homeric epics, but only with grave reservations:

"Though right triumphs in the main plots of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, it does not do so *because* it is right. Achilles obtains divine aid because he has, through Thetis his mother, the ear of Zeus himself; and Odysseus is assisted by Athena because she is, for reasons never made clear by Homer, his patron-goddess."²⁵

It is of course quite true that both Achilles in the *Iliad* and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* are powerfully aided by their divine protectors. But, then, so are their enemies. Every hero, every state, every cause has its divine champion in the Homeric scheme of things. Even the thoroughly

²³ *Odyssey* XVII, 291ff.

²⁴ *Odyssey* XVII, 312ff.

²⁵ *Merit and Responsibility*, 62.

despicable Cyclops, Polyphemus, is under the protection of his father Poseidon. So the presence of divine protection can hardly be a sufficient answer to the question of who triumphs in the Homeric epics. We are still left with the question of why victory goes to the particular heroes — and to the particular gods — to which Homer assigns it. For, just as some human causes are more “right” in terms of Homeric values, so some gods will inevitably be more in the right than others.

But there is also another very important point that should not be overlooked in connection with divine protection of human beings and states. Because the gods take sides on human issues and act in a far from impartial manner throughout the epics, Adkins concludes that “the gods as portrayed generally in the Homeric poems are far from just”.²⁶ But is this necessarily the case? We today take it for granted that divine justice should be totally impartial and unbiased. But it does not follow that the absence of this particular type of justice in Homer means that the Homeric gods are “far from just”. All it means is that the Homeric gods — and Homeric society generally — operate on a different standard of justice from that of modern times.

This, indeed, appears to be the chief problem with Adkins’s interpretation of moral values in Homer. Though, as we have seen, he never really defines the term “justice”, in practice he takes it for granted that justice means treating everyone alike in a “co-operative” spirit. When it turns out that people are treated unequally throughout the Homeric epics not only by other human beings but even by the gods themselves, Adkins naturally concludes that justice is not highly valued in Homer either amongst men or gods. Such a conclusion is totally unjustified. All that one may conclude from the evidence of the Homeric poems is simply that Homeric society has a *different* conception of justice from the modern concept, and certainly not that Homeric society did not value “moral responsibility”.

It is indeed very significant that even the gods in Homer should have been identified with a particular side, a particular cause. For, far from being an example of lack of justice, loyalty to one’s friends was traditionally associated in the Greek mind with justice and was even identified with it.

²⁶ *Merit and Responsibility*, 62.

This doctrine recurs in our sources right down to the time of Plato. Here, for example, is a quotation from the sixth-century poet Theognis:

“May the great brazen heaven fall on me —
that dread fear of earth-born men —
if I do not help those who love me and be a
vexation and misery to my enemies.”²⁷

Themistocles, the Athenian statesman, is similarly reported by Plutarch to have pointed to the archon’s throne and to have exclaimed: “May I never sit on that throne without my friends gaining more from me than strangers”.²⁸ In the *Republic* Plato spends a good deal of effort discussing this very doctrine, which is put into the mouths of some of his characters as the definition of *dikaiosune*. In fact, Polemarchus defines *dikaiosune* in virtually identical terms to Theognis and Themistocles, namely as: “To do good to one’s friends and harm to one’s enemies”.²⁹

What this really means is that it is right to distinguish in one’s treatment of friend and foe, and, more generally, between people on the basis of their social status. A man’s friends will tend to be drawn from the same social class as himself and justice will therefore, according to this definition, result in unequal treatment. The fact that this approach to justice does not conform to the view of justice which is current today should not lead us to be so intolerant as to dismiss it as a concept of justice at all. We must just accept it as a different concept of justice. Once we can understand that, then it should not be too difficult to realise that, as I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, far from placing “moral responsibility” and “duty” in a position of insignificance, the Homeric epics actually place these values at the very centre of things and value them very highly indeed.

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²⁷ Theognis, 869–72.

²⁸ Plutarch, *Aristides* 2.4; *Moralia* 807B.

²⁹ Plato, *Republic* I, 332D.