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Ancient Philosophy's Hardest Question: What to Make of Oneself?

THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY AMBITION of Graeco-Roman philosophy was to make human life safe for long-term happiness. All the principal schools—Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, and Stoics—contrast the pull of circumstances and human coercion with what persons can always make of themselves if they focus their identity and values on their status as rational agents. We have inherited from that project our folk psychology, as it is sometimes called: the preferential distinctions between mind and body, reason and passion, love and lust, consistency and vacillation, serenity and anxiety. This folk psychology goes so deeply into our cultural roots that we easily assume it to be natural. In fact, it was scarcely formulated before Plato. He and the succeeding Greek and Roman philosophers adopted it for the purpose of liberating the best life for oneself and one's associates from external dependency. Although we still draw selectively on that ideal, we probably agree with Plato's predecessors that happiness is far from being largely in our own power. How did that remarkable proposal emerge? Even after Michel Foucault, I don't think we yet have an adequate genealogy for outrageous, or should I say courageous, ideas like Stoic freedom.[1] This paper is an attempt to sketch a genealogy by bringing in a broader range of cultural data than is customary among those who share my research interests.

I

The question of my title is deliberately ambiguous: "What to make of oneself?" meaning "What should I take myself to be?" and second, "What to make of oneself?" meaning "What should I fashion myself into?" The first question is cognitive, asking "Where do I fit within the ontology of things?" The second question is practical or ethical, asking "What shape or goal should I give to my life?" However, the ambiguity of the question also makes the philosophical point that "What to make of oneself?" combines the cognitive with the practical. You can hardly undertake to fashion yourself without some preconception of what you are or could be, and you can hardly have a preconception of what you are or could be

without also having some strong motivation or purpose. I shall call this question of my title the self-model question.

The self-model question has been implicitly asked and implicitly answered at every human time and place. For it is embedded in the very idea of a culture or society. Family, clan or community, status, role, gender, race, topography, myth, tradition, religion—all these and much more have been and continue to be ubiquitous instruments for telling people what to make of themselves. "Who are you and where do you come from?" is the stock Homeric question to a male stranger, and it is standardly answered in terms of name, lineage, and native place.

The self-model question takes on a quite different register when it is asked explicitly and critically. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus* Socrates does this by way of explaining why he has no time to waste on the interpretation of myths:

I can't as yet know myself, as the inscription at Delphi enjoins; and so long as that ignorance remains it seems to me ridiculous to inquire into extraneous matters. Consequently I . . . direct my inquiries . . . rather to myself, to discover whether I am a more convoluted beast and more steamed up than Typhon, or a gentler and simpler creature, whose natural allotment is something divine and unsteamed up.[2]

Socrates is not inquiring into his local identity as an Athenian citizen, but asking what to make of himself innately or by nature, as the human being that he is. The word *nature* (*physis*) marks his inquiry as a philosophical quest: What is it to be human, with the implication: What will a true answer to that question tell me about how I should live my life?

"Know yourself" was the famous Delphic injunction, but this text is one of the earliest places where that commandment is explicitly enrolled in the service of philosophy. By tradition it had meant "know your limits" or "know that you are not a god." Socrates, in striking contrast, interprets the Delphic precept as an invitation to ask an extraordinary disjunctive question: Is it my nature to be bestial and violent or godlike and peaceable?

The classical Greek world or mentality was full of gods. Nothing is harder than this for us moderns to grasp when we visit that world. The difficulty is not primarily one of engaging with the complexities of polytheism and alien rituals. Rather, it is a difficulty that arises out of the radical differences and inconsistencies attaching to the gods according to speaker and context. Typhon, though bestial in form and attributes, was divine. So when Socrates positions himself between Typhon and "a divine and peaceable nature," he is advancing his own and not a standard paradigm of divinity as such. The unqualified benevolence of god(s), as proposed by Plato, was an outlandish thesis in its day, a thesis that he constantly urges against the lies of popular mythology; but there was no inquisition or sacred text or thought police to check Plato from uttering it.[3]

The relevance of this to my theme is twofold: first, when Greek philosophers began to ask the self-model question, they were pushing at an open door by comparison with societies such as those in medieval and Renaissance Europe where Chris-

tianity had settled the main details. Second, radical fluidity in the concept and connotations of the divine provided the philosophers with the opportunity to formulate theologies that turned divine attributes into human ideals and terms of self-definition, or to say it better, projected human ideals and terms of self-definition onto the divine. Hence Plato's extraordinary answer to the self-model question in several of his dialogues: "Make yourself as like as possible to God."[4] When ancient Stoics looked to their philosophy as the only foundation of real freedom, the rationale for what they were doing had a great deal to do with this Platonic recommendation.[5] In other words, the Stoic's outlook rested on a self-model that was as much theological as it was psychological.

Speaking broadly, we can say that the leading ancient philosophers, notwithstanding their numerous differences, answered Socrates' question by proposing that we have it in us to aspire to divinity (whatever that precisely means) at one extreme and to become bestial at the other. We are taken to be composite creatures, embodied souls or minds, and what we make of ourselves depends crucially on how we negotiate this complex structure. The body, so the theory goes, gets its life from our souls, and since our souls give us our identity as sentient and purposive beings, whatever is good or bad for our souls is better or worse than anything that merely benefits or harms our bodies.

II

Let us step back for a moment from these Greek thoughts about gods and souls and bodies and remind ourselves of how very ancient they are. We can find an English word-for-word translation of them, but a translation is not a genealogy. In my opening paragraph I described our relation to Greek philosophy by the familiar metaphor of "cultural roots," but I am far from wedded to it. Roots generate predictable crops, but what we cull from the Greeks constantly shifts according to our perceptions, interests, and prejudices. I prefer the model of a house, fashioned out of "crooked timber" (to borrow Isaiah Berlin's arresting phrase) and containing hundreds of rooms and levels and passages with extensions and demolitions occurring regularly and randomly.[6] We so-called Westerners have taken over a huge wing of this house, which we tinker with constantly; but we also have the run of numerous distant rooms, including the classical room, some of them totally begrimed and neglected and others less so. We visit these rooms from time to time, picking up bits and pieces that take our fancy, and sometimes we try to take them back to our own part of the house. But that's a long distance, and on the way those ancient artifacts become so bespattered with the dust from nearer rooms and corridors that we have a devil of a job (if we are historians) to see them for what they once were. So we tend to fit them into our regular cupboards instead of dusting them off, scrutinizing them, and building a special cabinet for them.

So it is, I want to suggest, with our appropriation of ancient self-models. We all have some feel for ideas like Stoic freedom and autonomy, or for Socrates' positioning himself between the bestial and the divine. But that feel is almost impossible to detach from all the subsequent incrustations that alienate us from ancient Greece—monotheism or agnosticism, human rights, social welfare, technology, antibiotics, body transplants, and so forth. There are, though, ways of trying to engage such detachment, however imperfectly. In this paper I will approach the self-model question as something that is itself so heavily incrusted by Greek culture that it needs a genealogical approach in order for its historical significance to be grasped. How did Plato come to pose the terms of Socrates' self-model question? What was psychologically, ethically, and socially at stake?

"In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast," as Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Man* echoed Plato, two thousand years later. I called Socrates' self-model question disjunctive, but in spite of its either/or form, the question is also rhetorical and wildly optimistic, for it entertains the possibility that human nature includes, or can aspire to, what is objectively best in the world. As I have remarked, the connotations and particularities of Greek divinity could vary greatly according to context, but as a generalizing verbal sign, *theos* (god) connoted extraordinary power, authority, status, beauty, bliss, and immortality. In addition, the Olympian gods as a collective, and Zeus in particular, were traditionally believed to sanction certain ethical rules and to be angered by human breaches of these. When Plato makes Socrates wonder if his nature includes a divine portion, a contemporary reader would be challenged to ask what selection of divine attributes could be humanly applicable, especially with "gentle and peaceable" as Socrates' gloss on the divine nature; for in numerous preceding texts or contexts that nature had been construed as anything but well disposed in its relation to persons.

Plato, notoriously, advanced elaborate arguments attempting to prove the immortality of the human soul. If their conclusion were sound, it would follow that human beings are like gods in respect to the very attribute that had traditionally been the strongest marker of difference between them. From Homer onward (and no doubt for centuries earlier) Greek gods are "the deathless ones" (*athanatoi*) and human beings are "mortals" (*brotoi* or *thnētoi*): these terms virtually function as proper names, markers of generic identity and difference. Plato was not the first Greek thinker to challenge this radical distinction between the divine and the human, only the most illustrious and thorough.[7] Actually, as an item in answering the self-model question, literal or personal immortality turned out to be too much for Aristotle, or for Stoics and Epicureans, to attribute to humans. But this limitation did not inhibit them from treating godlike activity or likeness to god (however these are to be understood) as the highest goal that human beings should aspire to in their embodied *here and now*, if they are to make the most of themselves.

Did the prephilosophical tradition offer them any prototype for these audacious proposals? Yes and no. Homeric heroes, both Achaeans and Trojans, are fre-

quently called "godlike." This term marks them out from the mass of people, calling attention to their resplendent beauty and prowess. When the philosophers appropriate the idea of "likeness to god," they trade heavily on this pair of properties, beauty and prowess (*aretē*), which were also signified in the Athenian male status ideal of being *kalos kai agathos*.[8] But the philosophers' linguistic conservatism actually accentuates their conceptual innovations in at least two respects. First, the beauty and prowess that they propose as aspirations and potentialities become qualities of the mind and character, strictly and entirely. Second, these qualities and the likeness to god that they involve are presumed to be available in principle to everyone with the aptitude and determination to shape themselves accordingly; these things are not contingent gifts to a few socially privileged individuals, but projects or goals built into human nature as such.

The philosophers' goal of happiness is an equally striking instance of linguistic conservatism combined with conceptual innovation. Human flourishing had been traditionally linked to divine support, hence the standard word for happy, *eudaimōn*, which brings both ideas together. The word literally means "divinely favored," but because divine favor was so hard to assure and predict, happiness was tantamount to good luck. For even though there were acknowledged ways of trying to please this goddess and avoid displeasing that god, Greek myths and Greek experience constantly underlined the precariousness of happiness as conceived in terms of material prosperity. This outlook is brilliantly captured by the historian Herodotus when he imagines the Athenian Solon warning Croesus, the fabulously rich and complacent King of Lydia, to heed the following answer to the self-model question: "The human being is entirely *sumphorā*"—which one could translate weakly by "a creature of chance" but more tellingly by "a disaster," because Croesus would soon find Solon's words validated by his own total ruin.[9] If long-term happiness was to be a real and reasonable human aspiration, it had to be redefined with corresponding revision not only to people's theologies but also to their self-models.

The decisive step, as usual, was taken by Plato. What he proposed, in brief, was that we shall be divinely favored and therefore capable of achieving *eudaimonia* if we submit ourselves to the *rule* of reason: reason can function for us as our "internal divinity" (*Timaeus* 90a–c), making our lives safe for long-term happiness and excellence. The expression "rule of reason" slips easily over the tongue. Like "enslavement to passion" (another innovative Platonic metaphor), it is one of those dusty items from our cultural house that we have put in our own cupboard without close scrutiny. Focus on the words "rule" and "enslavement," and you are transported back to the world of Athenian politics—except that Plato's politics is psychological. He politicizes the mind, to express the previously unimagined idea of *self-government*—an idea that divides each of us into a natural ruler, reason, and a set of natural subjects, our drives and appetites. Upset the proper hierarchy, and we become like an anarchic state, tyrannized by our passions.

This psychological model has become so hackneyed and contentious that it

requires a real effort to pretend that we are hearing it for the first time—hearing it as novel and more important, as *empowering*.[10] We need to interrogate the proposal that reason is our "internal *divinity*." What can that possibly mean? How did Plato come to link reason with divinity? What does that linkage imply about his understanding of a well-integrated mind? Where does it push the issue of what to make of oneself?

To show how much turns on these questions, I need only select from claims that subsequent Greek philosophers made under Plato's influence. For Aristotle, our intellect is "something divine"—our most powerful and precious possession— and the basis for a "contemplative" life that is both quintessentially human and yet more than merely human.[11] The understanding of nature and values possessed by an expert Epicurean hedonist equips one to "live like a god" and to be happy even on the rack.[12] The Stoic Epictetus tells his students that they are never alone because they have a divinity within them, vested in their rationality: his project, as teacher, is to help them to so identify with this divinity that they become like god, or even become gods.[13]

These are not the remarks of wild spiritualists or magicians. The philosophers who voice them are hardheaded reasoners who value empirical evidence, proof, and clarity. They are committed to advancing practicable recipes for human happiness, recipes that put this goal securely, or at least maximally, in our individual power. But the grandiosity of their project becomes especially clear when we recognize that it amounts to the denial that any human life *has to be* tragic. That denial flies smack in the face of a literary tradition that had generated unsurpassed representations of tragic suffering. What is Achilles to make of himself when he discovers that his angry withdrawal from the Achaean host has brought about the death of Patroclus? What is Medea to make of herself when she discovers Jason's perfidy? What is Oedipus to make of himself when he discovers that he has committed incest and parricide? We all identify with these questions and the wondrous pathos by which they are voiced; we do not find them obscured by the cultural dust of succeeding centuries. Surely Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides are close to us, and certainly closer than Plato's stipulations about divine reason or Stoic ventings about mental freedom?

So Bernard Williams has powerfully argued.[14] I sympathize. But the issue I am airing in this paper is not what we later folk choose to take out of the cultural cupboard, from time to time, but an exploration of why, to repeat, the ancient philosophical tradition had the audacity, or if you will, the insensitivity to occlude tragedy. For that is what the ancient philosophers' answers to the self-model question come to. Nietzsche may have been wrong to explain the demise of Attic tragedy by the emergence of Socrates and Plato, but he was correct to note the incompatibility of Greek philosophy with a tragic Weltanschauung.[15]

Oedipus, of course, was the supreme example of fated and therefore involuntary suffering, but the Stoics do not shrink from quoting the Theban king's shat-

tering moment of self-discovery, "O Kithaeron" (the mountain where he had been exposed as a newborn infant at his parents' behest), and commenting, as Marcus Aurelius does: "Even those who say 'O Kithaeron' endure."[16] Or as the black-humored Epictetus says, in recommending Stoicism:

The kings begin from a position of prosperity: "Festoon the palace." Then about the third or fourth act comes "O Kithaeron, why did you receive me?" Slave, where are your crowns, where is your diadem? Your henchmen are no help to you now.[17]

We can hear the echo of Solon to Croesus, but Epictetus reduces tragedy to a faulty mind-set, a failure of reason's rule, a vain identification of one's self with the outward accoutrements of power. Even the more sober Aristotle, who gave something to external conditions as a determinant of happiness and defended the aesthetic value of tragic drama, argued that a genuinely excellent or rationally guided man would not be reduced to misery, supposing, like King Priam, he lost his fifty sons and daughters.[18]

I haven't yet clarified the godlike rationality and control that can save us from tragedy. But whatever it should turn out to be, we should not be surprised that ancient philosophers, drawing on their cultural inheritance, called that saving faculty divine. Their tradition also offered them one paradigm of a great and sagacious survivor—Odysseus—the exemplary hero who kept his eye on the single goal of homecoming, adaptable to every obstacle, and favored by Athena herself, the goddess of wisdom. Lest you find this a fanciful comparison, here is how Epictetus (III.26.33–35) turns Odysseus into a Stoic sage:

When he was shipwrecked, did the difficulty weaken or shatter him? Consider how he approached the girls to beg for necessities, which is conventionally regarded as a disgrace . . . "like a mountain-reared lion."[19] What did he trust in? Not in reputation or money or status but his own strength—that is to say, his own judgments about the things under our control and the things that are not. For these judgments are the only things that make people free and unimpeded.

Epictetus (I.12.3) even parallels Odysseus with Socrates, on the basis of their treating themselves as always subject to a god's supervision, which Epictetus takes to mean the supervision or guidance of reason.

This homely Stoic comparison scarcely casts analytical light on philosophical rationality. Yet, it is an illuminating strand for my genealogical investigation. One of the main tasks of philosophy is to articulate questions whose implications have been previously overlooked even though a culture's framework offers some implicit answers to them. A philosopher's answer to the self-model question may well, as it does with Plato, include radical new proposals, but those proposals will be quite ineffective unless they touch base with some conglomerate of ideas already in play. The question of what to make of oneself was ancient philosophy's hardest question because it was first asked within a culture that was bewilderingly pluralist in its

implicit understanding of human identity and potentiality, and also its understanding of divinity.

If we privilege certain texts, especially texts of Greek tragedy, we get the impression that human happiness and autonomy and the rewards for justice are a snare and delusion. Yet, that pessimistic perspective, far from dampening an ideology that valued competition, achievement, and social solidarity, was really the flipside of this very same coin. Greek literature, and to judge from the historians, real Greek mentality could veer rapidly between upbeat and downbeat, reason and passion, generosity and cruelty. It is a modern (though fully understandable) fashion to emphasize the tragedians over Aristophanes, and the dark *Iliad* over the brilliant *Odyssey*. By choosing Odysseus as a mythological paradigm for their perfected philosopher, the Stoics were saying in effect: our philosophy is an updating of one of Greece's greatest and most positive cultural archetypes. Plato, or maybe the historical Socrates, took the same point; for at the end of the *Apology* Socrates expresses the hope of meeting Odysseus in an afterlife and conversing with him and with Homer and other heroes.

Those of us who study ancient philosophy, especially ancient ethics, need constantly to remind ourselves that Plato and the philosophers who followed him were not writing for some modern conference but for a society that was shaped by turbulent politics, male domination, ethnic superiority, slavery, and superstition, a society deeply uncertain about the divine or human foundations for justice and mutual security, but as receptive to comedy as to tragedy and accustomed to valuing conduct as well as art on the basis of its beauty and good order (*kosmos*). Against this background, I return to my questions about rationality's salvational power and its connections with divinity.

III

The Greek for rationality is *logos*: whence logic and the names for so many of our academic disciplines—zoology, psychology, and so forth. Saint John connects *logos* with God in the first sentence of his Gospel, but that connection does not help my genealogical inquiry. John, as a Hellenistic Jew, is drawing on the concept of divine *logos* that Stoic philosophers had been propagating for centuries. The beginning, or the divine principle (*archê*), of all things in Stoicism is also "the word," except that this standard biblical translation should be amended to "reason" or "rationality." But what is the Greek genealogy of that?

Logos in Greek is a notoriously multivalent and even contested term. It often signifies meaningful speech, but it is derived from a verb that includes the following among its most basic senses: collect, select, recount, and account. *Logos* became the standard Greek word for speech because all discourse involves such activities as collecting, accounting, explaining, and so forth. Apart from talking then, *logos* ac-

quired all the connotations we today associate with thinking. This, though, was a gradual but momentous process—nothing less than the evolution of rationality, both as an explicit concept and as an explicit marker of the difference between human faculties and the features of other animals.[20] In the earliest Greek philosophers (before Plato) we can actually observe this evolution taking place, and in none of them more seminally than Heraclitus. That remarkable thinker speaks by hint and paradox rather than discursively, but his notorious obscurity does not extend to the following crucial points.[21]

Heraclitus pioneered the notion that nature is a law-governed system, a system of regular changes that conform to determinate measures and proportions. He advances an account or *logos* of this system, but the system and his account of it are two aspects of the same thing. He accounts in words for the *logos* or formula that *is* nature. We may say, to make Heraclitus comprehensible to our modern selves, that he gives a rational account of a rationally structured world. But, as I said before, "rational" slips very easily over our scientifically educated tongue. Heraclitus cannot appeal to explicit concepts of rationality; for there are none at this date. What he does have available to him are such concepts as structure, measure, proportion, balance, rhythm, ratio. His *logos* is all of these, and because it is all of these it comprises a great deal that *we* associate with rationality. However, Heraclitus is not defining rationality, but discovering it, and helping himself to it via the best term available to him—*logos*. In addition, he associates the *logos* with divinity. Heraclitus's divinity governs the world by governing itself according to determinate measures and proportions. This is the first clear example in Greek of cosmic and divine rationality.

What we have here is an amazing set of ideas that will be enormously potent both for the future of ancient philosophy and also for all the cultures that it has influenced. First, the connection between the human faculty of *logos* and the physical universe as an orderly system; second, the selection of balance, order, and proportion as markers of rationality; third—and this is what I was primarily looking for—the linkage between the *rule of reason* and divinity. In Heraclitus's philosophy, *logos* is both a global force and a mental power. His protophysics is also protopsychology. Heraclitus, anticipating Plato's Socrates, says: "I went in search of [or inquired into] myself."[22] The cosmic order that he discovered—a universe governed by divine *logos*—offered itself as a startlingly new paradigm for what to make of oneself: a *microcosm* of psychological balance, self-measurement, internal control, and beauty.

Scholars of ancient philosophy have begun to recognize that the so-called Presocratics, long regarded as mainly protophysicists, were as absorbed by the self-model question as they were by cosmology.[23] Rationality's godlike capacity to govern the self is a thought that took root as a consequence of the idea that the world itself is a cosmos, an orderly structure governed by a superhuman and therefore divine mind.

Yet, outside the heady air of pre-Socratic science it was obvious that *logos* often spoke with the voice of Typhon, Socrates' steamed-up beast. We are not yet in a culture accustomed to hearing that human beings or divinity have a rational faculty as such. The sophist Gorgias, Plato's elder contemporary, agreed that *logos* is a great power, capable of producing "the most divine products." But what Gorgias means by these products are the effects of persuasive speech on a malleable audience.[24] In the analysis of *logos*, which Gorgias offered in defence of Helen's adultery with Paris, human beings are so susceptible to the charms of eloquence that they can be persuaded into anything. By contrast with Plato's deeply structured self-model (which is still on the horizon), Gorgias trades on the notion that we are essentially passive and pliable recipients of words, especially words that work on our passions and make us feel good.

Gorgias was a brilliant exponent of the psychology assumed by every courtier, media operative, or crowd pleaser. The self-model he attributes to the recipients of *logos* is one that lacks any framework or internal structure or autonomy. Listeners, he implies, cannot take charge of anything, least of all their own happiness, because they have nothing to take charge *with*. They are ruled by external *logos*, that is, words imposed upon them; they have no internal guardianship, consisting of their own *logos*; no rationality. They are, in sum, as powerless to resist the contemporary demagogue as the archaic Greeks had been to resist their arbitrary gods.

Herodotus offers us an extraordinary illustration of this kind of self-model, or rather non-self-model, in his account of how Xerxes decided (if that is the word) to invade Greece.[25] He presents Xerxes as initially reluctant to undertake this expedition. But under the influence of his aggressive cousin, Xerxes was persuaded to do so. First, though, he invites his advisers to give their opinion. The aggressive cousin reiterates the case for invasion. Then Xerxes' uncle speaks on the opposite side. Xerxes responds to him with intense anger. A bit later, Xerxes ponders his uncle's words and finds them sensible after all. He goes to bed and has a dream that tells him he was wrong to change his mind. However, on waking he takes no account (*logos*) of this dream and tells his councillors that he will follow his uncle's advice after all. The second night, the same dream figure returns to him, and tells him that if he renounces the campaign, he will fall from power as quickly as he rose. Xerxes summons his uncle and says to him: "I can't take your good advice, much though I would like to do so," and offers his dream as the reason. But instead of leaving matters there, Xerxes says to his uncle: Get into my clothes, sit on my throne, sleep in my bed; if a god sent the dream and wishes me to invade Greece, he will send you the same dream.

The uncle, a half-hearted rationalist, hedges his bets. At first, he reacts to Xerxes' extraordinary instructions by telling him that dreams are merely figments of one's waking concerns, with nothing divine about them. Still, he adds, the divine origin of your dream can't be completely excluded. Let's see if it appears to me too—but forget about this idea of my putting on your clothes. The dream isn't going

to think that I am you simply because I wear your clothes and sleep in your bed. But if that's what you insist on, I will do it. Xerxes' dream then appears to the uncle impersonating the king, sees through the assumed identity, and terrifies him. At once, the uncle eats his own cautious advice, accepts the dream's prediction that Xerxes will conquer Greece, and switches to gung-ho enthusiasm for what will turn out to be a disastrous venture, just like Croesus had previously experienced.

Is this a tongue-in-cheek story laced with pro-Hellenic propaganda? Maybe. But it rings completely true as an illustration of the completely volatile and pliable self—a self that can make nothing of itself because it lacks any structure or capacity to go in a direction different from the way someone else's words persuade it to go. Gorgias must have loved Herodotus's account of Xerxes' manipulation. How did Plato react to Gorgias?

IV

We know, because Plato wrote a dialogue called *Gorgias*. There Plato contrasts the freedom and excellence of a self-scrutinizing soul, ruled by reason, with enslavement to political rhetoric and lust for political power. As before, we need to recognize the startling novelty of these ideas in this context. Through a series of oppositions—soul versus body, mental health versus bodily health, proof versus persuasion, truth versus illusion—Plato generates the constituents of a self-model premised on the thesis that personal happiness, justice, affection, and community all depend on *internal* balance and order. Long before Plato, the Greeks had a word, *sōphrosynē*, literally "safe-thinking," which they mainly used to express compliance with external authority. *Sōphrosynē* is often translated by self-control. But that translation anticipates the very idea that Plato in the *Gorgias* was probably the first to formulate explicitly—the difficult idea of conceptualizing the self in terms of a ruling principle (reason) and a set of otherwise unruly parts.[26]

We saw how Heraclitus pioneered the concepts of cosmology and rationality. Plato draws on that legacy in the *Gorgias* dialogue in order to press his claims for the supreme value of internal balance and self-regulation. To Callicles, an ambitious believer in the natural right of the strong to dominate the weak, Plato's Socrates says:

Wise people say that heaven and earth, and gods and humans, are held together by community, affection, order, *sōphrosynē*, and justice; that is why they call this universe a *kosmos* [a beautiful structure], and not disorder or intemperance. (508a)

Socrates follows this striking observation on the harmony of nature, with a still more arresting statement: "You haven't noticed, Callicles, that geometrical proportionality (*isotēs*) is very powerful among gods and humans; your idea that you have to try to grab more for yourself is due to your neglect of—geometry": hardly the failing we attribute to *our* lawmakers. In the context of the *Gorgias*, neglect of geome-

try turns out to be an explanation for why the likes of Callicles don't really know what to make of themselves.

So far in this paper I have avoided mentioning the problematic word "morality." I can no longer do so, because, as we have just seen, Plato connects his concepts of internal balance, self-control, and the rule of reason with community, affection, and justice. Plato's main project in the *Gorgias* is to prove that injustice does not pay. He makes Socrates argue that injustice presupposes ignorance about happiness, that is, one's own good, because injustice involves a disorderly and uncontrolled self, and only a regulated self with no interest in *disproportion* can be happy.

Is Plato's recourse to geometry here simply a metaphor? Hardly. In his philosophy, mathematics is the constant paradigm of rationality; it was the staple of his educational program in the Academy. The self-model that Plato offers his students requires their thinking of themselves as mathematicians whose skill in that exact discipline will facilitate the rule of reason over all aspects of their lives. And because mathematics includes the field of astronomy, where divine order conspicuously reigns, it is an exercise of the divine dispensation allotted to human nature.

I don't propose to explore Plato's mathematics. What matters about it, for my theme, is the fact (as we have just seen) that he credits geometrical proportionality "with great power." The question I have been addressing all along is the Greek genealogy of the ideas of autonomy, self-control, ruling oneself, modeling oneself on a peaceful divinity and not on Typhon. If we are to make any sense of ancient philosophy's claim that reason can secure lasting happiness (even on the rack, if you are a Stoic or an Epicurean) and also safeguard morality, we had better detach morality from all those incrustations it has acquired during its subsequent and tattered history. As construed by the ancient philosophers, morality is not obedience to God as distinct from following one's own inclinations. Nor is it doing one's duty, simply as prescribed by cultural norms. Nor is it respecting so-called human rights, or sacrificing oneself for some greater cause. What the ancient philosophers in general take morality to be is the self-imposed rule of good reasoning—called *orthos logos* by Aristotle and the Stoics, and best translatable, to catch its ancient nuance, as "correct ratio" or "correct proportion."

The morality of ancient philosophy is a kind of mathematics—a calculus of making what is good for ourselves balance what is good for others. A self that prizes its rational autonomy is taken to be crucial to this enterprise because, the thought goes, you can be no good for your community unless you care for yourself with an understanding of what it is in your best nature to be. Could the morality of mathematics really enable one to be happy on the rack, or to tell the tyrant, with Epictetus (I.1.23): "You can fetter my foot but not me"? Not, I fear, in my case; for I was never much of a mathematician. But *tempora mutantur*—times change. In the culture where ancient philosophers first posed their self-model questions, rationality in general and mathematics in particular struck their discoverers and users as "great powers," just as Plato says.

It should be evident from what I have been saying that rationality's power, or the rule of reason, was a supremely normative concept for Plato and his successors and, moreover, a concept of that which is absolutely good per se. As such, it was taken to be supremely desirable and therefore capable of motivating the will. David Hume famously objected that reason "is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."[27] For Hume, our volitions are entirely grounded in our passions or impulses, and reasoning is demoted to a purely instrumental and subservient role. Plato by contrast, at the beginning of the philosophical tradition, viewed reason as that part of the self that is best and quintessentially human, and is endowed with its own unique desires and pleasures.[28]

Cosmic balance and beauty, mathematics, body/soul dualism, medicine and politics as sources of metaphors for mental health, authority and subordination, aspiration to a quasi-divine identity—all of these are scattered around in that distant room of our cultural house, contributors to the genealogy of self-control, internal freedom, personal integrity, making the best of oneself. Homer's heroic age, if it had ever been, was long over. But the heroic ideal survived, as it always does. With the advent of ancient philosophy and a more complex and inquisitive society, the self-model question offered itself as a challenge comparable to our exploration of outer space. To those who had known Socrates at first hand, he was a new kind of hero, able to lie in the arms of the male pinup model Alcibiades all night, and remain impervious to erotic arousal.[29] Or, to take another example, Epicurus— racked with bodily pain on the last day of his life, and writing to a friend: "The joy in my soul at the memory of our past discussions was enough to counterbalance [note the mathematics] all this pain. I ask you, as befits your lifelong companionship with me and with philosophy: take care of the children of Metrodorus."[30]

V

Philosophical power and heroism in the service of personal happiness and social concern: It was an extraordinary project—to secure human life, one's own and other people's, from tragedy. What, if anything, can we make of this idea from our perspectives? Here are some closing thoughts and questions.

As answers to the question "What to make of oneself?" the philosophies I have sketched must have a familiar resonance for some at present, while striking others as strange, unworkable, and perhaps repellent. On the one hand, you have only to read Emerson or Thoreau to hear strong echoes of Stoic self-reliance and liberty.[31] On the other hand, genetics, anthropology, and shades of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, together with the whole gamut of socioeconomic reality and personal relationships—all these promote the thought that human identities are primarily constructed by numerous factors external to a person's control: and *therefore* (this is very

important) our happiness is extremely dependent on what those external factors deliver or don't deliver to us.

Actually, all the philosophies I have discussed were so sensitive to the effects that social forces have on shaping human identity that they more or less anticipated today's anthropological datum that human beings are "cultural artifacts." Their educational ambitions, far from naively ignoring this datum, were a critical and very deliberate reaction to it—a reaction to the power of conventional ideologies to shape people's values and motivations without remainder. A Platonist or an Aristotelian or a Stoic or an Epicurean would agree with Clifford Geertz that "we are . . . incomplete . . . animals who complete . . . ourselves through culture."[32] What these schools propose, each in its distinctive way, is that humans have the option of choosing a comprehensive philosophy as their culture, rather than simply the socially given, so that they shape themselves by its norms rather than letting themselves be manufactured by mere tradition or stereotypes about power and la dolce vita.[33]

However, ancient philosophy was scarcely political in the sense of directly influencing or changing the principal institutions of government or economic and social conditions. It was the practice of a tiny minority, who might include slaves and women but were primarily well-to-do and politically free males. Notwithstanding Plato's and Aristotle's elaborate political theories, ancient philosophers chiefly focused their attention on what individuals should do to secure their own and their friends' happiness rather than on what a state should do to maximize its citizens' opportunities for a good life. Ancient philosophers emphasized personal autonomy because they wanted to give individuals a framework for turning adversity as well as prosperity to good use, with trickle-down benefits to family and friends from their association with internally just and well-balanced persons.

Modern ideals of (re)distributive justice, egalitarianism, and social welfare have heavily implicated government in our basic conceptions of the external determinants of a happy life. And so today, we—at least we in Berkeley—think that it is the job of laws and state institutions to do a great deal to protect people not only from injustice but also from economic and social and environmental tragedy. To quite an extent, our "Western" world has converted ancient philosophy's ideal of internal autonomy and balance and freedom, and also moral mathematics and the rule of divine reason, into the would-be fair apparatus of a free and mutually beneficial social system. As long as that goes reasonably well, it seems to undercut the rationale of a philosophy like Stoicism.

Of course, this apparatus often fails, or it holds, but you are still left groping on your own. Then the self-model question has to be faced. Ancient philosophy tries to persuade us that those who look to reason and excellence of character as the foundation of their identity and freedom and social relationships are never bereft of the fundamental ingredients of happiness. If we find this far too much or far too little, is it because we think long-term happiness is too subjective and impenetrable

to be secured by any theory, or because we think it primarily depends on the way the world treats us, or is it because we have not been faced with the sinister knock at the door in the middle of the night and had to make something of ourselves in the violation of home and person? I leave these as questions for my readers to ponder.

Appendix:
Happiness in Greek Ethics

My main purpose in writing this paper was to address a gap, as I find it to be, in our modern understanding of Graeco-Roman ethics and its psychological and theological underpinnings. Long before philosophy, the Greeks, like all peoples, had strong ideas about human excellence and such virtues as courage, intelligence, and justice. What starts with Socrates and Plato is the remarkable proposal that if you have such virtues, you have all or most of what you need in order to achieve long-term happiness (*eudaimonia*), even under quite unfavorable conditions of body or material goods. It is the tie between virtue and happiness that clamors for analysis and justification.

Modern scholars have done much to clarify this *eudaimonistic* perspective.[34] Even so, there is a reluctance to acknowledge that when the ancient philosophers claim that their specification of the best human life constitutes *eudaimonia*, they could really be talking about happiness in anything like its modern usage, such as a fully satisfying life from one's subjective perspective.[35] Certainly, they are not talking about transient moods and intermittently pleasurable sensations; so some scholars prefer to translate *eudaimonia* by "well-being" because the standard "goal" of ancient ethics involves one's life (-time) as a whole.[36] Nonetheless, there is copious evidence that what the ancient philosophers mean by *eudaimonia* is happiness, and not a condition that can be captured by a less demanding English expression.[37]

The gap that I have tried to address concerns the extraordinary boldness from the pre-philosophical or indeed from any perspective of making long-term happiness a rational disposition as distinct from a condition controlled by fortune, temperament, and external conditions. We have no difficulty, perhaps, in understanding why virtues should be construed as rational dispositions, but why should they and rationality itself be thought to condition happiness? The answers I have suggested trade heavily on the idea that the human capacity to reason and to impose structure and balance on one's life struck the ancient philosophers as an amazing discovery and power, a godlike endowment as it were. Hence happiness or a flourishing life could be thought to be a project that was in one's own control, should one choose to be ruled by one's own rational capacity.

Thanks to Foucault's brilliant work in his book *The Care of the Self*, the notion that Graeco-Roman ethics was premised on self-cultivation has acquired general currency.[38] While there is much to applaud in his lively account of the ascetical

exercises associated with this goal, I think that Foucault was too inclined to assimilate them to early Christian attitudes and deontological injunctions, as when he writes: "It is the anxiety concerning all the disturbances of the body and the mind, which must be prevented by means of an austere regimen; it is the importance attributed to self-respect . . . that is exercised by depriving oneself of pleasure" (*Care of the Self*, 41). There is no entry for "happiness" or *eudaimonia* in the index of his book, and Foucault rather plays down the tranquillity and even "joy" that many ancient philosophers take their ethical prescriptions to promise.[39]

Notes

1. See especially Epictetus *Discourses* 4.1, where freedom is construed in exclusively ethical terms, as the capacity "to live as one wills," unconstrained in one's emotional disposition by any external contingency. Epictetus, who began his life as a slave, treats philosophical enlightenment as liberation from the only slavery (false judgment) that is *necessarily* inimical to happiness: 2.16.40–42.
2. Plato *Phaedrus* 230a. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.) Typhon was a hundred-headed dragon, born to the primeval divinities Earth and Tartarus, after Zeus had defeated the Titans, and the last great challenge to the Olympian gods' sovereignty (see Hesiod *Theogony* 819–68.) By Plato's time Typhon was identified with the volcanic force under Mt. Etna. My translation "unsteamed up" seeks to capture Plato's pun on the name Typhon and the word *atyphos*, which signifies the negation of *typhos*, meaning delusory arrogance.
3. See especially Plato *Republic* 2.379b–c.
4. Plato *Theaeteus* 176a, *Timaeus* 90b–d, *Republic* 10.613a. In all these passages "likeness to God" involves the inter-entailment of happiness, virtue, and rationality: see Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New*, (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999), 53; and David Sedley, "The Ideal of Godlikeness," in Gail Fine, ed., *Plato 2 Ethics, Politics, Religion, and the Soul* (Oxford, 1999), 309–28.
5. See Epictetus *Discourses* 2.14.13: "If the divinity is free, he [the would-be philosopher] must be free. . . . And so in everything he says and does he must act as an imitator of God."
6. From the title of Isaiah Berlin's book *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London, 1990).
7. Plato's Greek precursors include Pythagoras probably, and Heraclitus and Empedocles certainly.
8. Untranslatable, but literally "beautiful and good."
9. Herodotus 1.32.4: *pan esti anthrōpos symphorē*; the last word is the Ionic equivalent of the Attic form *symphorā*.

10. Nietzsche grasped this point, and he also anticipated my methodological strategy of looking for the cultural antecedents of the Greek philosophers' emphasis on self-mastery and the rule of reason. For Nietzsche, Socrates was inspired by the will to power, but he turned reason into a domineering master, "decadently" attenuating the complexity of all other natural impulses. See Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley, 1998), 136–41, for references and discussion.
11. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.1177a13–17, 1177b26–1178a2.
12. Epicurus *Letter to Menoeceus* 135, in Diogenes Laertius 10.118.
13. Epictetus *Discourses* 1.14.11–14; 2.19.26–27. Cf. 2.8.10–11.
14. In Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993); see esp. 166: "In important ways, we are, in our ethical situation, more like human beings in antiquity than any Western people have been in the meantime. More particularly, we are like those who, from the fifth century and earlier, have left us traces of a consciousness that had not yet been touched by Plato's and Aristotle's attempts to make our ethical relations to the world fully intelligible." Williams's immediate context is the question of how we, as persons "who know that the world was not made for us, or we for the world," respond to Greek tragedy.
15. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York, 1956), 88: "Consider the consequences of the Socratic maxims: 'Virtue is knowledge; all sins arise from ignorance; only the virtuous are happy'—these three basic formulations of optimism spell the death of tragedy." Here Nietzsche is referring to tragedy as art, but later, when he deplores "scientific optimism," he extends his critique to the demise of "the tragic world view" (104).
16. Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 11.6, citing Sophocles *Oedipus Tyrannus* 1391. Oedipus's next words, "Why did you receive me?" are included by Epictetus, as we see.
17. Epictetus *Discourses* 1.24.16–18.
18. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.10.1100b35–1101a8.
19. Epictetus alludes to Homer's description of Odysseus as the naked and hungry hero approaches Nausicaa and her maids; *Odyssey* 5.130.
20. Once *logos* has acquired the connotation of rationality, nonhuman animals are standardly described in Greek as *aloga zoia*, nonrational creatures, in contrast with humans who are *logikoi*.
21. See the fine study by Edward Hussey in A. A. Long, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), 88–112.
22. Heraclitus, in H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, vol. 1, 6th ed. (Berlin, 1951), 22 B101.
23. See my comments in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, 10–15.
24. Gorgias *Praise of Helen* 8, in Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 82B.
25. Herodotus 7.8–18.
26. For further discussion and Plato's Socratic antecedents, see my comments in "Hellenistic Ethics and Philosophical Power," in Peter Green, ed., *Hellenistic History and Culture* (Berkeley, 1993), 142–46. Note too that Plato finds *sōphrosynē* apt for expressing such related ideas as self-knowledge (*Alcibiades* 1, 131a–b), reflexive or second-order knowledge ("knowing what one knows and what one doesn't know," *Charmides* 167a), and *agreement* to the rule of reason by all parts of the self (*Republic* 4.442d).
27. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, part 3, section 3. Hume calls "talk of the combat of passion and of reason" and the obligation "for every rational creature . . . to

regulate his actions by reason" the fallacious "method of thinking" on which "the greatest part of moral philosophy, ancient and modern, seems to be founded."

28. Plato *Republic* 9.580d ff. For an illuminating discussion of normative reason's rule in Plato and in Greek concepts of self more generally, see Christopher Gill, *Personality in Greek Epic, Tragedy, and Philosophy: The Self in Dialogue* (Oxford, 1996).
29. Plato *Symposium* 219d–e.
30. Epicurus in Diogenes Laertius 10.22.
31. Thanks to the role of Epictetus in Tom Wolfe's novel *A Man In Full*, Stoicism was even called "hot" by recent newspapers and was echoed in *Newsweek* (end of February 1999) where a journalist supporting John McCain was accused of being a Zeus worshipper for allegedly preferring McCain's honor and duty to George W. Bush's Christian faith and charity.
32. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York, 1973), 49.
33. Reflections on the extraordinary figure of Socrates were a prime stimulus to such self-fashioning, as Nehamas has brilliantly shown in *Art of Living*.
34. See especially Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford, 1993).
35. See ibid., 452–55.
36. See Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 34.
37. See my comments in *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge, 1999), 181–82; and Lawrence Becker, *A New Stoicism* (Princeton, 1998), 138–49.
38. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley (New York, 1986).
39. See the selection of texts, together with discussion, in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987), 1: 154–57 and 394–401.