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Philosophical?**

La Trobe University, Bendigo

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Dr Roger Sworder

Worner Research Lecture 2003

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Biography



In March 2003 Roger Sworder completed his thirtieth year of lecturing in Bendigo. He has lectured at the Bendigo Institute of Technology, the Bendigo College of Advanced Education, La Trobe University College of Northern Victoria, La Trobe University Bendigo, and now the Faculty of Regional Development, La Trobe University. He looks forward to many more changes of name before his retirement. He graduated Master of Arts from the University of Oxford, taking his degree in the study of Classical Philosophy and History in the original languages. He undertook doctoral studies at the Australian National University with a thesis on Plato's theory of knowledge. He has published one book, *Mining, Metallurgy and the Meaning of Life*, on the consecration and, more recently, the desecration of these crafts in Western history. His second book, *Homer on Immortality: the Journey of Odysseus as a Path to Perfection*, is in the press. He is currently head of the Department of Arts on the Bendigo Campus.

The Reception of Homer as a Philosopher

Is Homer's poetry philosophical? The easy answer to this question is yes and no. Yes, Homer's poems were generally considered philosophical up to about 1900; and no, Homer's poems have not been considered philosophical for the last century. But though this answer is easy and true, it is unsatisfactory. Homer's poems have remained the same for two and a half millennia: why should they have ceased to be philosophical at the end of this long period? It is not the poems which have changed but our notion of philosophy. Our late exclusion of Homer from the philosophical register tells us much more about us than it tells us about Homer. It tells us that our present view of philosophy and of the history of philosophy is eccentric.

We may begin with the account of Homer and Hesiod given by Herodotus at the end of the fifth century BC:

But it was only - if I may so put it - the day before yesterday that the Greeks came to know the origin and form of the various gods, and whether or not all of them had always existed; for Homer and Hesiod, the poets who composed our theogonies and described the gods for us, giving them all their appropriate titles, offices, and powers, lived, as I believe, not more than four hundred years ago.

Homer and Hesiod established Greek theology and religion according to Herodotus. Since for every line of Hesiod we have twenty or more lines of Homer, we may take it that the bulk of this theology was Homer's. We may feel that the achievement of this task does not make Homer a philosopher

exactly, a lover of wisdom who seeks for it, but one who is already wise. We may compare Homer to Moses, the author of the Pentateuch, as a founder of religion, a prophet and patriarch, a figure of scriptural authority. But unlike Moses Homer was both venerated and deprecated by his successors, followed and damned. A century before Herodotus, the philosopher Xenophanes had blasted Homer for his impious treatment of the very gods whose worship Herodotus believed Homer to have established. According to Xenophanes, Homer's accounts of these gods are absurdly anthropomorphic and morally wicked, since Homer describes the gods as engaging in theft, adultery, deception and lying. Xenophanes' disapproval of Homer is echoed a generation later by the crosspatch philosopher Heraclitus, who declared that Homer deserved a beating. But both Xenophanes and Heraclitus would agree with Herodotus that Homer did indeed establish, with Hesiod, the forms of Greek religion.

This simultaneous veneration and deprecation of Homer in classical Greece has no parallel in Judaism or Christianity. Perhaps as a result we find it very hard to accord Homer the kind of spiritual pre-eminence we grant Moses in the history of his people. This is to overlook a difference between the Greeks and ourselves in our approach to religion: classical Greek civilisation was essentially dialectical. No other people in our epoch has been as much given to argument as the Greeks. The early attacks on Homer by Xenophanes and Heraclitus turn Greek religion into a matter of the mind. No creeds here, no commandments, no principles. Every step had to be taken by every seeker. This dialectical engagement with their scriptures, with no holds barred, is a defining characteristic of the early Greeks. Xenophanes and Heraclitus, unlike Homer, are still accounted philosophers in our time, and they are attacking Homer as a philosopher.

The dialectical tension between Homeric scripture and the unfettered seeker is screwed to a much higher pitch by Plato's critique of Homer in the *Republic*. Plato attacks Homer on many fronts, building in part on the earlier criticism of Xenophanes. For Plato too, Homer's stories of the gods as adulterers and deceivers are inadmissible and Plato instances the passages in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to which he takes exception. He mentions, for example, Homer's tale of how Ares and Aphrodite commit adultery, and their entrapment by Hephaestus, Aphrodite's husband, under a golden net. According to Plato such stories, even if allegorical, are not suitable for young ears, since

children are in no position to distinguish the allegorical from the literal. Further, Plato argues that all poetry such as Homer's which imitates a variety of speakers is deceptive, while a plain narrative of a discussion in indirect speech is acceptable. Plato makes this attack in a literary dialogue in which he carefully imitates in direct speech the contributions of his several speakers!

At the very end of the *Republic* Plato gives us a different view of Homer. In his mythical account of the afterlife with which the *Republic* concludes, Plato's speaker, Socrates, defines philosophy as the knowledge one needs as a discarnate soul when one comes to choose one's next animal or human life on earth. As Plato describes the process by which each soul chooses its next life on earth, he emphasizes that the free choice we make then is the most important one of all. It is for this moment that all our training on earth should prepare us. And then Socrates describes the choices of next lives made by the great heroes of the past, by Agamemnon and Ajax and Odysseus, the heroes of Homer's poems. Odysseus is the last to choose, takes the longest time to do it and finally chooses the most philosophical life, a life most like Socrates' own. Homer's Odysseus stands before us at the very end of Plato's *Republic* as the last paradigm of philosophy. Plato, it seems, could discern in Homer's Odysseus the lineaments of a philosopher.

In the last centuries before Christ and in the first centuries following, Homer's achievements as a philosopher were recognised in a different way, as scientific and symbological. The school of the astronomer Apollodorus read Homer's account of Odysseus' journey as a description of the terrestrial globe, with its arctic, temperate and equatorial zones. This mode of interpretation was developed by Crates of Mallus, the famous librarian of Pergamum, the second library of Greek learning after Alexandria. In the third century AD, the philosopher Porphyry, disciple of Plotinus and critic of Christianity, developed this way of reading Homer still further in his essay *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs*. The cave of the Nymphs is the cave which Homer describes on Ithaca as Odysseus' point of return after his nineteen years' absence. Porphyry's essay on Homer's cave of the Nymphs is the single substantial account we have of how to read Homer symbolically. For Porphyry Homer's cave is a symbol of the world and of the womb. Odysseus' arrival there is a symbol of how the immortal spirit is incarnated into a mortal life.

On Porphyry's reading, Homer supposes that the human being is a spirit invested by a body, that we are incarnated. Porphyry interprets Homer as a proto-Pythagorean or a proto-Platonist, despite Plato's attacks on Homer in the *Republic*. This is certainly to see Homer's poetry as philosophical. And we remember that Plato did not exclude the possibility of reading Homer allegorically. He argued only that young minds were incapable of the allegorical reading and should not be given certain tales. Porphyry concludes his essay with the following remarks:

Nor is it proper to believe that interpretations of this kind are forced, and are nothing more than the conjectures of ingenious men: but when we consider the great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in prudence and in every kind of virtue, we ought not to doubt but that he has secretly represented the images of divine things under the concealments of fable.

Porphyry's conversion of Homer into an honorary Platonist continues with Proclus in the fifth century AD. Proclus wrote an elaborate defence of Homer against Plato's criticisms in the *Republic*. Proclus, too, is seeking to reconcile Homer and Plato, the two greatest teachers of his tradition, and he takes very seriously Homer's claims that he is describing gods in his fables. For Proclus each appearance of the gods in Homer's epics is a theophany, a manifestation of an eternal principle. So for example, Proclus defends Homer's story of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite and their entrapment by Hephaestus as an account of the divine principles of Love and Hate, how they are bound together by the creator in each and every living creature and will remain bound until the creature's dissolution. Proclus' defence of Homer against Plato is the second most extended work we have of Homeric criticism after Porphyry's essay on the cave of the Nymphs and it appears just before the end of classical paganism. Like Porphyry's essay it is a Platonist work.

In 529 AD Plato's Academy in Athens was closed by order of the Church after nine hundred years and despite the massive contribution already made by Platonism to Christian theology. The Christian God, who is also the God of the Old Testament, is a jealous God at least in public. In the Eastern Church the study of Homer was maintained but at their best the interpretations were moral rather than intellectual or spiritual. The allegory where it exists has become one-dimensional. Almost exactly one thousand years after Proclus'

defence of Homer, the philosophical reading of Homer reappears in Western Europe with a spate of new disciples. Among them is the glorious figure of Pico, Count of Mirandola in northern Italy. This young man picked up the threads of the philosophical Homer exactly where Proclus had laid them down. His writings are full of Proclus and Plotinus, Plato and Porphyry. He knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldee and Arabic besides Italian and French. He was trained in Scholastic philosophy and was expert in logic, mathematics and physics. He maintained the transcendental unity of all religions as a kind of universal, holy magic, and he wrote of Homer:

....we shall prove someday in our Poetical Theology, that Homer disguised this wisdom, as all other wisdoms, under the wanderings of his Ulysses.

That day never came and we do not have Pico's proof of the philosophical dimension to Homer's *Odyssey*, Pico died at the age of thirty-one.

He died in Florence and it is easy to see why he should have chosen to go there. This was the city where Marsilio Ficino had founded a new Platonic Academy under the patronage of the Medici, with the intention of diffusing the Platonic doctrines which Ficino took to be the foundation and proof of Christianity. Here, too, Sandro Botticelli was painting his pictures of Venus rising from the sea and with the Graces, and still more wonderful, his version of the adultery of Ares and Aphrodite where a clothed goddess calmly watches over her nude, disarmed and sleeping lover. Here again is the Homeric fable, damned by Xenophanes, half damned by Plato and justified by Proclus, reappearing under Botticelli's hand in a most spiritual form.

The revolution in philosophy led by Ficino and Mirandola was the intellectual vanguard of the Florentine and indeed Italian Renaissance. It must have seemed that suddenly the whole world's wisdom had been made available to them, as well as Christendom's. In every scripture known to them they experienced the poignant shock of recognition. And nowhere more so than with Homer, Pythagoras and the later Platonists. In England Thomas More translated a life of Mirandola and revelled in the new liberty. His *Utopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly* demonstrate the extraordinary rapidity with which the new learning was being diffused and the heady, sometimes even flippant joy which it occasioned. At the beginning of the seventeenth century George Chapman made his translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into English verse.

Before and after the turn of the nineteenth century England experienced its own full-scale restoration of the Homeric and Platonic philosophy in the figure of a single individual. Thomas Taylor was born of humble, dissenting parents in London and was sent at the age of nine to St Paul's School, famous for its teaching of Greek, Latin and Hebrew. But the young Thomas did not approve of the way in which the dead languages were taught at the school and left in his early teens to study mathematics at home. He had already fallen in love with his wife-to-be and their early marriage precluded any chance of his going to university. So he spent his life as a clerk like millions of Londoners after him, in a bank, in a public office and finally as Assistant Secretary to the Society of Arts. But this clerk had an unusual hobby. He was the first English translator of the whole of Plato's works, the whole of Aristotle's works and of the majority of the works of Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus and the other later Platonists. Meanwhile the great universities slumbered on! It is no surprise that Taylor's writing hand seized up from the double pressures of his work and play.

Taylor was no mere devoted scribe. He wrote powerful introductions to his translations as well as freestanding essays. He appended to his translation of Porphyry's *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs* his own symbolic and spiritual reading of all Odysseus' adventures in the *Odyssey*. He was a passionate believer in the truth and wisdom of his authors and published this fact far and wide. He was ridiculed for it but he also attracted the best minds of the day. John Flaxman, William Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft were all close friends of Taylor. At a remove from personal friendship, Coleridge called some of Taylor's books 'my darling studies' and Wordsworth's *Intimations Ode* turns on a living Platonism which may be traced back to Taylor. Both Keats and Shelley acknowledged their debts to him. But where Ficino and Mirandola created the mental space of the new Academy within the limitations of Christendom, Taylor and his followers denounced the Enlightenment root and branch. This, as Taylor understood it, was the great threat to the true philosophy, the cloud obscuring Apollo's sun. As with the Renaissance, the reappearance of that sun in the person of Taylor coincided with a new movement in the arts.

The issue between Taylor and the Enlightenment was the meaning of the term philosophy itself. Did it mean what Plato and Pythagoras had meant by it or did it mean what John Locke had redefined it to mean? According

to Locke, philosophy was properly a kind of conceptual analysis based on the principle that all our concepts are derived from experience. In the first book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* Locke claims to disprove the traditional doctrine of innate ideas. Philosophy is concerned with no other world than the physical, according to Locke, and empiricism is the only way to know it. Locke nowhere refers to Plato in his attack on innate ideas even though Plato is the classical exponent of the doctrine. Nor does Locke address Plato's arguments for innate ideas. For this reason the Enlightenment does not make any dialectical advance on Platonism though it pretends to do so. It merely denounces the philosophical tradition and calls itself philosophy in contradistinction from it. This was Taylor's view of the Enlightenment. For Taylor, following Plato, the natural sciences were far inferior in purity and power to mathematics, theoretical astronomy, music and dialectic. These sciences, studied independently of nature, were for Plato and Taylor the only path to the wisdom which philosophy is seeking.

For Taylor the restoration of the ancient philosophy was also the only defence against the expanding materialism of his age. The burgeoning trade of the new British Empire seemed to Taylor to have expelled all intellectual life. Rarely can there have been a thinker so much set against the grain of his time, and it is cheering to remember that he and Blake kept company. Again and again in his essays and introductions Taylor rams home the charges and fires his broadsides into the mercantilism everywhere around him. These broadsides are beautifully written, as elegant as they are damning, and Taylor is never drawn by his anger to lose his equanimity. He presides over the many centuries of humanity in the certain knowledge that his wisdom will at length come round again, that true reason must eventually triumph over the follies of his own time and of any other.

And so it may. But it is certainly true that in the shorter term Thomas Taylor has lost his battle for the true philosophy far more comprehensively than he could ever have imagined. Locke's notion of philosophy, not Plato's, has triumphed. After Locke's model the history of early Greek philosophy itself has been reconstructed in the twentieth century. In the English speaking universities the study of early Greek philosophy is now devoted to the demonstration of how there the first steps were taken towards the empirical sciences as we now practise them. The early Greek thinkers are no more than groundbreakers on the path to the Enlightenment. Whatever in their writings

does not conform to this model becomes primitive, mythical superstition from which their reason had started to save them. The poems of Homer have no place in this canon. Parmenides and Empedocles are still accounted philosophers in the new order, but the poetic form of their work is dismissed as a bizarre, primitive impediment to the clear expression of their physics, biology and logic. In short, the passionate dialectical balance between Homer's poems and the philosophical tradition which followed is conjured out of existence as if it had never been. The syntheses of Homer and Plato achieved by Porphyry and Proclus might never have been written.

For Taylor's hostility to the empiricism of his age is returned in full. Incapable of fighting the traditional philosophy on philosophical grounds, the new empiricism simply defines the old philosophy out. To a Platonist today the term academic is painful when used of the contemporary context, since philosophy and the history of philosophy have largely been excluded from the institutions which claim the name of Plato's school today. As for Homer, I should think that fewer than one in a hundred students who have studied Homer's poetry in the last century in a university have any idea of those dimensions to the poems which the later Platonists opened to our understanding. How could they even begin to enquire since Homer is no longer regarded as a philosopher in the modern sense? By such shifts the history of philosophy is made safe for the intelligentsia of a too mercantile nation. The very institutions created to develop and preserve the ancient philosophy are enlisted in its systematic exclusion. It is some small comfort to remember that the original Academy suffered similar abuse after Plato's death.

Even in the later twentieth century there has been one great university exponent of the ancient philosophy, Kathleen Raine. Like Taylor she has maintained the tradition almost alone in a hostile world. Yeats and Blake seem to have led her to Taylor and Taylor to Proclus and Porphyry. Her book, with George Mills Harper, *Thomas Taylor the Platonist* I found in our campus library twenty-five years ago. It awakened me to the meaning of Homer. Her two volume *Blake and Tradition* examines Taylor's contribution to Blake's formation and contains a full account of Blake's painting of Homer's cave of the Nymphs in the light of Porphyry's essay. Her studies of Yeats, himself a scholar of Blake, reveal the extent of Yeats' debt to this same millennial tradition from Homer onwards. It is salutary and chastening to

read the foremost university critic of his day, F.R. Leavis, on the approach taken by Yeats and Kathleen Raine to Blake:

Let me say bluntly that I am not grateful to Yeats for inaugurating the kind of Blake research of which Miss Kathleen Raine is the recognised high priestess in our time. Blind to Blake's genius, it generates blindness, and perpetuates a cult that, whatever it serves, doesn't serve Blake or humanity. The notion that by a devout study of Blake's symbolism a key can be found that will open to us a supreme esoteric wisdom is absurd: and to emphasize in that spirit the part played in his life's work by Swedenborg, Boehme, Paracelsus, Orphic tradition, Gnosticism, and a 'perennial philosophy' is to deny what makes him important.

So Blake and Yeats, too, disappear from the agenda except for the lines which please Leavis. This is no way to study. But, then, for Leavis the great tradition means Dickens and George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, not Homer or Plato, Plotinus or Proclus, Botticelli or Thomas Taylor.

The Cyclops as Mystical Fact

Let Odysseus himself describe the scene in the court of Alcinous:

Lord Alcinous, my most worshipful prince, it is indeed a lovely thing to hear a bard such as yours with a voice like the gods. I myself feel that there is nothing more delightful than when the festive mood reigns in a whole people's hearts and the banqueters listen to a minstrel from their seats in the hall, while the tables before them are laden with bread and meat, and a steward carries round the wine he has drawn from the bowl and fills their cups. This, to my way of thinking, is something very like perfection.

Odysseus, though his name is as yet unknown to his host, is guest of honour at these feasts. His cup of happiness should be full. But there is much more to fill Odysseus' heart with joy than this. For the minstrel, the blind Demodocus, without knowing that Odysseus is present, begins the entertainment with a song about an argument between Achilles and Odysseus at another feast when Odysseus and Achilles served together under the walls of Troy. Here surely is the very acme of heroic satisfaction, to hear one's own deeds sung by a great minstrel at the very limits of the inhabited world, the last outpost of mankind. As he listens with the others, Odysseus begins to weep and covers his face with his cloak. Fond memories? Excess of joy? He covers his face because he is ashamed of weeping in front of the Phaeacians, and when the minstrel stops he uncovers his face and performs his social duties. But as soon as the minstrel starts, he weeps again. Alcinous alone sees what he is doing and hears him groaning because they are sitting next to each other. At this point, very tactfully, Alcinous suggests that the company has enjoyed the food and music and should move to other entertainments.

That evening things get worse. This time it is Odysseus himself, still anonymous, who asks Demodocus for a song about Odysseus, the story of the Trojan horse:

Odysseus broke down as the famous minstrel sang this lay and his cheeks were wet from the tears that ran from his eyes. He wept as a woman weeps when she throws her arms around the body of her beloved husband, fallen in battle before his city and his comrades, fighting to save his home town and his children from disaster. She has found him gasping in the throes of death; she clings to him and lifts her voice in lamentation. But the enemy come up and belabour her back and shoulders with spears, as they lead her off into slavery and a life of miserable toil, with her cheeks wasted by her pitiful grief. Equally pitiful were the tears that welled up in Odysseus' eyes, and though he succeeded in hiding them from all but the king, Alcinous could not help observing his condition; he was sitting next to him and heard his heavy groans.

This time there is no help for it. Alcinous speaks out over the minstrel and asks Demodocus to stop playing, for he does not please all with his song. And then, brilliantly, Alcinous launches into his longest speech, some fifty lines, as he presses Odysseus to tell them who he is. The shocking breach in the fabric of the feast is instantly repaired but an enormous pressure is put on Odysseus to speak his name. The whole assembly waits upon him in the silence which follows, the minstrel as expectant as the rest. Alcinous finishes his long speech on a most loving note: 'For a sympathetic friend can be quite as dear as a brother'.

And so at last Odysseus yields and tells them his name after praising the feast. But it is with the precise quality of his grief that Homer is concerned in the long passage just quoted. Just when we would expect Odysseus at the zenith of his self esteem he is in fact plunged to the very nadir of grief. How does Odysseus come to be feeling this? Demodocus is describing Odysseus' heroic fight to the death with Deiphobus in the palace on the night of Troy's sack. Far from being like the woman in the simile, Odysseus might be the man who laid her husband low as he has just felled Deiphobus, or he might be the officer commanding the troops who are beating her on the back and shoulders with their spears. Instead he is the woman herself and relives the sack of Troy as if he were one of his own victims. Odysseus has learnt the

meaning of his own fierce doings to the last bitter tear. We are reminded of Shakespeare's noble line:

And Justice always whirls in equal measure.

This is the spirit in which Odysseus finally reveals his name and the name of his country to the court of Alcinous. In the same spirit he tells them the story of his travels since leaving Troy. The third adventure which he narrates, his encounter with the Cyclops, is the first clearly fantastical adventure of his journey since it is an encounter with a giant. He describes how he led a band of his men to the cave of the giant one-eyed Cyclops, Polyphemus. He went there in the hope of gifts from a friendly host. But the giant, after interrogating Odysseus,

. . . jumped up, and reaching out towards my men, seized a couple and dashed their heads against the floor as though they had been puppies. Their brains ran out on the ground and soaked the earth. Limb by limb he tore them to pieces to make his meal, which he devoured like a mountain lion, never pausing until entrails and flesh, marrow and bones, were all consumed, while we could do nothing but weep and lift up our hands to Zeus in horror at the ghastly sight, paralysed by our sense of utter helplessness. When the Cyclops had filled his great belly with this meal of human flesh, which he washed down with unwatered milk, he stretched himself out for sleep among his flocks inside his cave.

For narrative force this is one of the very highest points in the *Odyssey*. The image of the cannibal at this point sears the mind; it is this image which more than any other makes the Cyclops story unforgettable. But does this ugly and terrible story serve a religious or philosophical purpose? Is it really necessary that I bring it to your attention this evening? Or am I trying to shock you merely for the sake of effect? In my view the Cyclops episode is the gateway to the inner meaning of the *Odyssey*. That is why it is the first fantastical adventure. The Cyclops episode, however stomach-churning, is the most accessible of any passage in Homer's epics to a philosophical reading. It is the proper place for such a reading to begin.

Why does Homer represent Odysseus as trapped in the cave of a giant man who devours his companions and means to devour Odysseus himself? Because this neatly turns the tables on human beings as carnivores. Here

Odysseus' companions suffer at the hands of a man exactly what all those goats and pigs, oxen and deer and sheep have suffered at their hands when they ate them. We have here a reversal very similar to the one in Alcinous' court. When Odysseus breaks down and weeps like a woman at Demodocus' description of his warrior prowess at the sack of Troy, he is experiencing as victim what he inflicted as victor. In the Cyclops' cave it is the same. Here, too, Odysseus is made to feel the violence of his own fierce doings. As Homer tells the story, Odysseus' weeping in Phaeacia comes before the Cyclops episode by a few hundred lines. As the epic unfolds, Odysseus' breakdown in Phaeacia alerts us to the possibility of a similar reversal in the Cyclops episode.

Eating is ugly even without the Cyclops' lack of manners. Worse than ugly, it is degrading. Later Greek thinkers were especially conscious of this. Incarnation as a mortal creature commits the fallen soul to the incessant struggle for the means to subsist in a war of all against all. In the case of human beings the extremity of this degradation is cannibalism; next comes the eating of meat; and last comes vegetarianism. If it were possible, Porphyry says in his essay on abstinence from animal food, we should abstain from all food. In every case the living human survives by the tearing to pieces and grinding to chyme of other living creatures. The whole world is this appalling feasting of creature upon creature, tearing at the flesh with talon and tooth. Justice, according to Hesiod, begins when members of a class or species do not eat each other:

*For the son of Cronos has ordained this law for men, that
fishes and beasts and winged fowl should devour one another,
for Justice is not in them; but to mankind he gave Justice
which proves far the best.*

People are just as a species because they do not eat each other, but only the gods are really just. They eat no creatures at all but only nectar and ambrosia. That is the ideal condition from which we have been precipitated into mortal life, to eat and to be eaten. And every mortal creature is in this fix. Even the dead thirst for blood. The companions are not cannibals though some of them are eaten by a cannibal. But this does not make that requital excessive. The companions are subjected to exactly what they have inflicted on all those other creatures: to be eaten by a man.

The cave of the Cyclops is a symbol of the human belly. It is a very literal symbol: the floor of the cave is covered by animal dung. The Cyclops lights and heats his cave with a wood fire which must aid decomposition and help to release the stink. Scattered here and there are the six little pools of human brains after the Cyclops has smashed the skulls of six companions. When Odysseus makes the Cyclops drunk, the giant falls over. Fortunately for him his great neck is turned or he would have choked on his own vomit, the mess of partly digested humans and strong wine which pours from his mouth as he sleeps. The stench alone must have been stupefying. This cave each of us carries around inside. We can never escape from it until we cease to exist as creatures. Possibly these details of the Cyclops story work even more powerfully on our twenty-first century imaginations than they did on the ancient Greeks. Our sanitation has gone to great lengths to preserve our awareness from these disgusting facts.

The filth and stench of the cave do not afflict Odysseus or his companions. It is the killing and tearing of the flesh which horrifies them. As they watch the Cyclops killing and eating the first two of their comrades, they weep and lift up their hands to Zeus spontaneously, it seems, or even automatically as though compelled to the gesture by the horrible vision before them and by their own helplessness. Horror at eating is not confined in the Greek tradition to acts of cannibalism but extends to meat eating in general and perhaps even to the eating of beans. The Pythagorean prohibition on the eating of beans, if such there was, is explained by some authors as arising from the similarity between the shape of the bean and the shape of the human embryo. The Pythagoreans were vegetarians for the most part and believed in the kinship of all life since human souls could transmigrate into the bodies of animals. Such a notion underlies Homer's account of how the companions were turned into pigs by Circe; and we must entertain the likelihood that the stag which Odysseus kills and which they all eat on Circe's island was once a human being before meeting Circe. It is generally supposed by modern scholars that this revulsion from meat eating was post Homeric and belongs to the sixth century, to Pythagorean and Orphic teaching. But there is nothing in extant Greek literature to top the power of Homer's description here. Orphism and vegetarianism, in their attitudes to the eating of animals, may as easily be derived from these Homeric teachings as original to post Homeric Greece.

The most powerful exponent of the horrors of eating after Homer is the fifth century philosopher-poet Empedocles. In his poem *Purifications* Empedocles denounces the eating of living creatures as the greatest pollution of mankind. His abhorrence is driven by a sense of how the eater and the eaten are interrelated:

Will ye not cease from this harsh sounding slaughter? Do you not see that you are devouring one another in the thoughtlessness of your minds?

This corresponds very closely to Homer's choice of a man-giant to eat Odysseus' companions. But Empedocles outdoes Homer's horror when he introduces the closest familial relations as binding victor and victims:

The father having lifted up the son slaughters him with a prayer, in his great folly. But they are troubled at sacrificing one who begs for mercy. But he, on the other hand, deaf to the victim's cries, slaughters him in his halls and prepares the evil feast. Likewise son takes father and children their mother, and tearing out the life, eat the flesh of their own kin.

Empedocles believed that he himself once lived as a plant. It is very hard to see how any living creature could avoid this kind of crime, whatever it ate.

This then is the condition of all mortal creatures, to be condemned to killing and eating their own kinsfolk so that they may themselves survive. In this respect the Greek sensibility seems to differ from the Jewish. In the story of Adam and Eve it is the eating of the fruit of a particular tree which ensures their downfall; in the Greek tradition it is the act itself of eating. It is true that the companions are doomed because they eat the Cattle of the Sun and not any cattle; and that they are turned into pigs because they eat Circe's posset and no other. But in the Hymn to Demeter Persephone is condemned ever to return to Hades because she eats some pomegranate seeds, and there is nothing special about these seeds. Consider the following lines of Empedocles:

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ancient decree of the gods, eternal, sealed fast with broad oaths, that when one of the divine spirits whose portion is long life sinfully stains his own limbs with bloodshed, and following Hate has sworn a false oath - these

must wander for thrice ten thousand seasons far from the company of the blessed, being born throughout the period into all kinds of mortal shapes, which exchange one hard way of life for another. For the mighty Air chases them into the Sea and the Sea spews them forth onto the dry land, and the Earth towards the rays of the blazing Sun; and the Sun hurls them into the eddies of Aether. One receives them from the other, and all loathe them. Of this number am I too now, a fugitive from heaven and a wanderer, because I trusted in raging Hate.

On this view we are all fallen divine spirits who have stained our limbs with bloodshed. This is related to the fragments of Empedocles which I quoted above. This sinful staining occurs when we tear to pieces our kinsfolk. But the parts of our human bodies, our limbs, are largely formed of blood themselves. Our being human requires our being insanguinated. So this staining of our limbs with bloodshed has the twofold meaning of our draining the lives of other creatures to nourish ourselves and of our being largely composed of blood as a result.

Homer and Orphics such as Empedocles share a deep concern over the killing and eating of living creatures by living creatures. The Orphics believed in the transmigration of the souls from humans to other species and such a belief appears in a very limited form in Homer's account of Circe's spells. But we do not find in Homer or Hesiod any belief in the superiority of the vegetarian diet over the carnivorous. Nor do we find in Homer or Hesiod the disgust at blood sacrifice we find elsewhere as early as Heracleitus:

They purify themselves by staining themselves with other blood as if one were to step into mud to wash off mud. But a man would be thought mad if any of his fellow men should perceive him acting thus.

Here again is the notion that our insanguination as human beings is a pollution. We stain ourselves anew with animal sacrifice. The great difference between Homer and the Orphics turns on this: can one exculpate oneself from the crime of killing and eating an animal by sacrificing the animal to the gods? For the Homeric worshipper the answer to this question is yes; for the Orphic the answer is no. For the Orphic, indeed, the spilling of blood on the altar in the act of animal sacrifice is a hideous pollution. Far

from purifying the killer, it adds sacrilege to the crime of murder. We felt the force of this when father sacrificed son with a prayer in the lines of Empedocles above. The prayer makes it especially bad. In his essay on abstinence from animal food Porphyry mentions the altar of the pious on the island of Delos, on which no animal was ever sacrificed.

In the Homeric epics sacrificial killing is enjoined upon Odysseus by Circe who provides him with the creatures whose blood will attract the dead. Teiresias tells Odysseus of the animals which he must sacrifice to Poseidon when he finds the people who know nothing of the sea or ships. Alcinous and Aeolus, kings of two perfect kingdoms, rejoice in continuous feasting on meat. The gods themselves are accustomed to join Alcinous' court at the table though they do not eat the same food. But already in Hesiod's work the picture is a little different. Hesiod gives us a very uneasy story about the origins of animal sacrifice in which Prometheus tricks Zeus into accepting the inedible parts of the animal as his portion while the best of the animal goes to the sacrificer. Zeus is angered by the trick and ill disposed to mankind in consequence, since it was on our behalf that Prometheus played the trick. This accounts, perhaps, for the practice of sacrificing and burning animals but only tasting them, so that the whole animal is truly the offering. This is the meaning of the word holocaust. This practice Porphyry ascribes to Pythagoras himself. But there is one passage in Homer where the sacrificing of animals for the purpose of eating them does turn to impiety: when the companions maintain their sad little ritual as they slaughter and eat the Cattle of the Sun. We feel keenly here the lack of aversive force in their actions, how their rags of piety make things worse. But this is not usually the case. When Odysseus and the companions enter the Cyclops' cave, they sacrifice one of the Cyclops' animals and eat it. This sharply contrasts with the Cyclops' own practice to Odysseus' credit.

But in the wider perspective, the perspective in which Polyphemus is the exact image of our own bestial humanity, every human being is there with the companions eating the Cattle of the Sun. Like them we are damned if we eat and damned if we do not. As Eurylochus eloquently explains, we have the choice of death by starvation or of death by other means, and most other means are preferable to starvation. In the larger perspective we must choose between starvation and committing a crime. This crime binds us indefinitely to imprisonment in the cave as eater or eaten, to the disgusting belly.

How living the victims are in these stories! They wriggle and squirm but there is no pity. The companions who were eaten by Polyphemus are at least brain dead by the time they reach his mouth. But he keeps them fresh, he does not kill them all at the beginning. No such unconsciousness for the companions taken by Scylla who call out to Odysseus by name as they are whisked up to Scylla's cave, the most pitiful thing which Odysseus sees on his journey. Worse still the feast on Thrinacie where the Cattle of the Sun continued to low and crawl after they had been turned into beef and hides.

The predicament of the companions on Thrinacie and the entrapment of Odysseus in the Cyclops' cave are images of the doom which has overtaken every mortal creature. All are caught in the cycle of mutual killing and eating, being killed and eaten in one's turn. Living creatures are the redundant energies of other living creatures who have been killed or have died a little sooner. This is a bleaker vision of our animal existence than that of Darwin's struggle for life. Is there any relief from it? Odysseus escapes both eating and being eaten: on Thrinacie he simply abstains from even tasting the slaughtered cattle; in the Cyclops' cave he escapes by the expedients of calling himself No one; of blinding the Cyclops; of hiding himself and his companions under the sheep. If his imprisonment in the Cyclops' cave is symbolic of the animal and human condition, then these expedients of his also require a symbolic or philosophical interpretation which will relate them exactly to our own condition. We have seen our own predicament in the story of the Cyclops. The story also tells us how to escape it. But that is for another time.

The most noble and worthwhile task which challenges Classical scholarship in the twenty-first century is the re-interpretation of Homer's epics as scripture. This done, and Homer restored to the philosophical canon, the history of Greek philosophy will be transformed from an account of the origins of empiricism into the unfolding of a wisdom as pertinent to us as to its first hearers. In my view the task of understanding the first philosophers of our era has largely to be done over again. In that task we will do much better to take ancient philosophers and modern poets as our guides rather than the present Academy.

Passages Quoted

- p. 1 Herodotus, *The Histories*, II, 53
- p. 4 Porphyry, *Concerning the Cave of the Nymphs*, 36
- p. 5 Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, 33
- p. 9 F.R. Leavis, *Justifying One's Valuation of Blake*, p. 18
- p. 10 Homer, *The Odyssey*, IX, ll. 2-11
- p. 11 Homer, *The Odyssey*, VIII, ll. 526-534
- p. 13 Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, Act 4, Scene 3
Homer, *The Odyssey*, IX, ll. 288-298
- p. 14 Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ll. 276-281
- p. 16 Empedocles, Fragments 136, 137, 117
- p. 17 Heraclitus, Fragment 5

Passages Cited

- p. 2 Xenophanes, Fragments 11-15
Heraclitus, Fragment 42
Plato, *The Republic*, Books II, III, X
- p. 3 Plato, *The Republic*, Book X
- p. 4 Proclus, *An Apology for the Fables of Homer*, pp. 509-511
- p. 14 Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, p. 46.
- p. 18 Hesiod, *Theogony*, ll. 533-560
Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XII

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