Kalos Kai Agathos: Homeric Origins

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In this paper we will trace the philosophical and historical development of the notion of the kalos kai agathos in Homer. The notion of the kalos kai agathos is a relatively late linguistic innovation, which achieves its fullest significance in the fourth century\(^1\). Nevertheless, there appears to be sufficient evidence to indicate that the nexus of connotations associated with the late fourth century development stretches back at least as far as Homer. This paper, therefore, will require an analysis of cognate terms from which the idea and the historical, sociological, ethical, political and ontological dimensions of kalos kai agathos develops.

To date, there have been only three major publications concerning the origin and meaning of the term kalos kai agathos. Hermann Wankel\(^2\) wrote a dissertation in 1961, Walter Donlan\(^3\) wrote an article reviewing Wankel’s thesis in 1973 and in 1995 Felix Bourriot\(^4\) wrote a two volume work in which he traced the term kalos kagathos from Herodotus in the fifth century to Aristotle.

Hermann Wankel maintains that the term kalos kai agathos existed as an attribute of the aristocracy as early as Homer, and during the archaic period was subjected to an umwertung (re-evaluation) by the aristocratic poets\(^5\). His argument is that the poets

\(^3\) Donlan, W., op. cit.
purged the original meaning of its purely social connotations and it gradually became an ethically charged term. Wankel goes on to say that in the late part of the fifth century the term *kalos kagathos* became a political catchword by the oligarchical elements reacting to those members of society who questioned the aristocratic claim to exclusively use the term\(^6\).

Wankel drew upon various philological studies of the term from C. Kohnhorn\(^7\) through to W. Jaeger’s *Paideia*\(^8\), although his thesis is indebted to the dictum of W. Jaeger, who maintains of the development of the term in Greek that:

> Culture is simply the aristocratic ideal of a nation, increasingly intellectualised\(^9\)

Wankel also draws upon a theory proposed by Nicolai Hartmann\(^10\) that the concept of aristocracy does not consist merely in political, social and economic pre-eminence, but it represents the inherent ethical tendency of the *aristoi* not only to *kratein* (to be descended from) but to *arista legein* (to select the best). By this, Hartmann meant that the Greek aristocrat, “was not simply the product of a particular class structure, but was also a conspicuous axiological exemplar”. He was “even in his basic tendencies somehow already morally in advance”.\(^11\)

Building upon these two ideas Wankel sought to find the marriage of the beautiful and the good in archaic Greece by constructing an ethical – aesthetic sphere of meaning.

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\(^11\) Wankel. H., p. 16.
grounded in the aristocratic value system\textsuperscript{12}. However, the philological evidence in support of his quest is less than satisfactory.

Bourriot holds that the term came into attic Greek from Sparta where it described a class of Spartiates remarkable for their ability in battle\textsuperscript{13}. Then in the last part of the fifth century the term became associated with young “snobs”, such as Alcibiades\textsuperscript{14}. In the last decade of the fifth century the term was used to refer to the bourgeois supporters of the oligarchs of Thermanes\textsuperscript{15}. Then in the fourth century the terms assumed two different meanings, one dealing with social status and the other with moral and civic virtue\textsuperscript{16}. According to Bourriot the culmination of the development of the terms is to be found in Aristotle’s \textit{Eudemian Ethics}, there they enjoy a special place as the complete moral excellence which can only be achieved by a leisured social and intellectual elite\textsuperscript{17}.

Bourriot rejects Wankel’s conviction that there is a tradition of \textit{kalos kai agathos} as an Hellenic ideal dating back to the Homeric poems. Instead, Bourriot maintains that the term was first used in the fifth century by the historian Herodotus\textsuperscript{18}, and in this he is correct. However, Bourriot traces the term only from the philological point of view. He concludes that each author is entitled to adopt his own approach to what these words mean. He says essentially that each author has:

\textsuperscript{14} Alcibiades was a politician in Athens after the Peloponnesian War. When Socrates asked him who were \textit{kaloi kagathoi} he responded the politicians. The thirty tyrants were now the ruling party and thus considered themselves \textit{kaloi kagathoi}. Alcibiades was one of these. See Cairns D.C., \textit{Op. Cit.} p. 75.
\textsuperscript{15} Cairns, D.C., p. 75. These oligarchs similarly arrogated to themselves the title because they considered that now they were the aristocrats.
\textsuperscript{16} Cairns, D.C., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{17} Cairns, D.C., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{18} Bourriot, F. p. 117. Vol. 2. (Notes).
His own type of kalos kai agathos.\textsuperscript{19}

Thus, by focusing attention on the philology, Bourriot divorces the evolution of the term from its wider socio/political and philosophical significance. Bourriot’s research uncovered a superficial and relativistic use of the term. In this paper we are looking to uncover the steady growth of the historical, sociological, ethical, political and ontological dimensions of the term.

Walter Donlan denies that the term was used earlier than the fifth century when the historian Herodotus first used the words \textit{kalos kagathos}\textsuperscript{20}. Donlan’s article was written to refute the tenet of Wankel that \textit{kalos kagathos} existed as an attribute of the aristocracy as early as Homer. Donlan traces the use of the term \textit{agathos} through the 300 years or so between the Homeric times and Herodotus. He observes that the traditional claim of the aristocracy to the title \textit{agathoi} was in jeopardy by the last third of the sixth century. Coining money and the rise of mercantile classes had made it possible for people of less than good birth to attain wealth\textsuperscript{21}. As wealth was traditionally considered to be one of the necessary conditions of being \textit{agathos}, people that had hitherto been \textit{kakoi} (bad, non aristocratic, vulgar) were now \textit{agathoi}. Theognis seems to reflect this meaning in discussing the discontented nobles - men who formally wore goat skins and pastured like deer “outside” the city. He says:

\begin{quote}
These are \textit{Agathoi}, son of Polypaus; and those
Who were once \textit{Esthloi} are now \textit{Deiloi}\textsuperscript{22} (57 – 58)
\end{quote}

According to Donlan, soon after the last third of the sixth century the aristocracy arrogated to themselves the term \textit{kalos}\textsuperscript{23}. This is because as a class they generally

\begin{footnotes}
\item[22] \textit{Deiloi} was used by Theognis to mean a \textit{kakos}, or beggar. Theognis’ point was that the social strata system had been inverted. Gerber (2003), \textit{Theognis} 1109-14. \textit{The Loeb Classical Library} p. 337, The President and Fellows of Harvard College
\end{footnotes}
possessed a physical beauty that people in the lower social classes were deemed not to exhibit\textsuperscript{24}.

It is our contention that while these studies have contributed enormously to the philological understanding of the development of the notion of \textit{kalos kagathos}, particularly in respect to social, political and ethical developments, nevertheless, much is left out of the picture. In particular, we will argue that the term \textit{kalos kagathos} is the culmination of a series of tensions in the philosophical understanding of value in ancient Greece that can be traced back at least as far as the Homeric epics. In particular, we wish to emphasise an unrecognised ontological dimension to the Greek conception of value. In this respect we will provide a reading of the Homeric epics that distinguishes, unlike the canonical secondary literature (Adkins\textsuperscript{25}, MacIntyre\textsuperscript{26}, Cornford\textsuperscript{27}, Dodds\textsuperscript{28} \textit{et al}), who merely provide a descriptive account of the social and moral attributions of the worth of Homeric times, a disparity between what is often referred to as Homeric value from the intention of Homer, to provide a moral analysis grounded in an ontology of the disintegration of the so-called Homeric value system. In other words we want to provide a hermeneutic analysis of the epics (particularly, the \textit{Iliad}) that distinguishes the historical nature of ‘Homeric value’ from the Homeric intention to critique this very system.

\textbf{II}

\textsuperscript{23} Donlan, W., p. 372
\textsuperscript{24} Donlan, W., p. 372.
\textsuperscript{26} MacIntyre, A., (1966), \textit{A Short History of Ethics}, London, Routledge & Keegan Paul.
The word *agathos* in Homer meant kingly, courageous or cunning, and so, the question, “is he *agathos*?” is the same as the question, “is he kingly, courageous, clever and cunning?” So in the Homeric epics this type of behaviour is sufficient to entitle a man to be called *agathos*⁹. So, when Agammenon intends to steal the slave girl Briseis from Achilles³⁰ he is still held to be *agathos*, whether he takes her or not, because the term is used in its sociological aristocratic meaning. This is because *agathos* is tied so completely to the fulfillment of function. A deviation of the kind Agammenon has in mind will not affect his ability to fulfill his social status and functions.

*Arete* (virtue) in Homeric times was related to fulfilling one’s social and professional roles. However, the *arete* of one social function is quite different from that of another. Thus a king’s *arete* lies in his ability to command, and a cobbler’s in his skill at making shoes. A man has *arete* if he has the *arete* of his particular social function³¹, for instance, if he is a good cobbler, thus, he fulfills the *telos* (goal) of making good shoes. Aside from the central and enduring attributions of value captured by the terms *agathos* and *arete*, several other words were in popular coinage which also indicated forms of worth and value.

Another Greek term of value in Homeric times is *kalos*. This appears never to have signified any indication of class in Homer³². It was a general predicate of beauty and was used of men, women and things, always with the same meaning³³. It appears in the broadest terms to have referred to external physical appearance. More than forty

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²⁹ MacIntyre, A., p. 6.
³¹ MacIntyre, A., p. 8.
³² Donlan, W., p. 367.
³³ Donlan, W., p. 368.
uses of the word appear in the lyric poets and there is only one exception to its being used as an explicit reference to external beauty\textsuperscript{34}.

Most commentators seem to agree that the term esthlos\textsuperscript{35} is a synonym for agathos and has nothing to do with inner moral worth, but once again is a social attribute like agathos, relating to excellence of function. esthlos is used in the Iliad of a man who could execute a good throw\textsuperscript{36}. Again in the Iliad, it was used of horses to mean well bred\textsuperscript{37}. Another example of the use of esthlos is when Nestor urged Agammenon to re-organise his troops into fighting units instead of an unruly mass so that he may be able to tell who is esthloi and who is kakoi\textsuperscript{38}. Kakos is the corresponding word of denigration in the sense that, the kakoi do not fulfil the social obligation/duty of their function.

Aischron, and its relative elencheie\textsuperscript{39} are derogatory terms. The terms designating various conceptions of worth have their counterparts in several words which connote their opposites. Elencheie is the state of mind of having done something aischron, (shameful), it is the condition of an agathos who has behaved as a kakos. This is illustrated in the Iliad II when Odysseus says to Agammenon:

"Now the Greeks are willing to make you most contemptible (elenchistos), in the eyes of all mortal men; and they will not fulfill the promise which they made when they were still on the way here from Greece, that they would return home only when they sacked Troy\textsuperscript{40}."

He admits that long campaigns are hard so that the Greeks are to be excused for wanting to go home, but nevertheless maintains that it is aischron to remain a long

\textsuperscript{34} The Saffo Fragment. Fr. 50, p. 97, The Loeb Classical Library.
\textsuperscript{35} Adkins, W., p. 32.
\textsuperscript{36} Book XV, p. 283.
\textsuperscript{37} Book XXIII, p. 348.
\textsuperscript{39} Adkins, W., p. 33.
\textsuperscript{40} Adkins, W., p. 33.
time and return empty handed\textsuperscript{41}. Once again we see a key feature of Homeric value systems in that “success” is a central determinant of functionality.

\textit{Aischos}, the adjective \textit{aeikelios}, the adverb \textit{aeikelios} is used to decry breaches of co-operative values\textsuperscript{42}. The effect of its use is to draw attention to the condition of anyone being mistreated, such as the serving maids being dragged through the palace\textsuperscript{43} in the \textit{Odyssey}. As we shall presently show this seems to intimate that there are internal values which run counter to the received ‘Homeric’ view. \textit{Aidos} is a word that is closely related to defeat and \textit{elenchos}. An example is when Hera shouts to the Greeks:

\textit{Aidos}, for shame! Base \textit{elenchea}\textsuperscript{44}

These are the key terms of value in Homer’s \textit{Iliad}\textsuperscript{45}. Both Wankel and Bourriot used them in the way Adkins describes their meaning in his seminal work, \textit{Merit & Responsibility}.

\textbf{III}

It is our contention that a distinction has to be drawn between Homer’s intention in writing the epics and the social conception of Homeric morality which provides the sociological backdrop to the times within which the stories unfold. Homer is teasing out the implication of the moral and political disorder of his times, by pointing out the moral ruptures in order and their causes. Thus, he is pointing to a deeper understanding of the sphere of the ethical and abstracting to an order of timeless reality which is reflected in some of the leitmotifs of the epics.

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Iliad} II 284 ff 4, cp. 119 ff. quoted in Adkins, W. p. 33.
\textsuperscript{42} Adkins, W., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Odyssey} XVI. 108 ff. quoted in Adkins, W., p. 41.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Iliad} V. 787 quoted in Adkins, W., p. 43.
\textsuperscript{45} Adkins, W., p. 45.
This reading appears to conflict with much of the secondary and canonical literature on Homer. In his book *A short history of Ethics* Alasdair MacIntyre deals with what he calls *The Pre-Philosophical History of “Good” and the Transition to Philosophy* in the second chapter. For MacIntyre, the term *agathos* relates solely to a judgement that can be passed upon a man concerning the way in which he discharges his social function, of the status he is born into. MacIntyre acknowledges that whilst the Greek word *agathos* is similar to our English word ‘good’ it differs, in that, for us a man may be kingly courageous or cunning, but need not necessarily be good, whereas in Homer he is *agathos* if he fulfils his social function. MacIntyre correctly observes that in the Homeric epics a man simply has to behave in a certain way to entitle him to be called *agathos*, and further, that this is in no sense evaluative in any deeper moral sense, in which one might conceive of a relationship between motivation and action. In other words it is a matter of external ‘show’. MacIntyre concludes that there is a gulf between the fact of calling a man *agathos* and appraising his behaviour when he says:

“The alleged logical gulf between fact and appraisal is not so much one that has been breached in Homer. It has never been dug. Nor is it clear there is any ground in which to dig.”

We will show that this indicates a very superficial reading of the Homeric epics. MacIntyre is confining himself to a philological examination of the social context in which the terms *agathos* and *arete* are used in Homer. There is no internal moral dimension to the term *agathos* when used of a man. Because of this there is no deliberation as to the cause of a man’s actions.

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46 MacIntyre, A., p. 5 et seq
47 MacIntyre, A., p. 5.
48 MacIntyre, A., p. 7.
It will now be useful to consider MacIntyre’s evaluation of what was meant in Homeric times by the use of the word *arete*, a cognate of *agathos*. A man who performs his social function also possesses *arete*. Provided a man is careful enough to perform his social function he cannot lose his *arete* nor can he be said to cease to be *agathos*. MacIntyre sees Homeric society as a unified one in which evaluation can depend upon established criteria of a family of concepts which presuppose a certain social order. This social order in Homer is characterised by a recognised hierarchy of functions49.

In recognising that Greek Homeric society needed a place for everyone and everybody in his/her place, MacIntyre very nearly grasped the thrust of Homer’s morality tale. He recognised society as functioning well with each person fulfilling his/her *arete*, but failed to penetrate below the surface of this social structure to see the gradual drawing out and improvement of the inner harmony and excellence of functioning in the individuals making up that society. MacIntyre stopped short of the hermenutic analysis we are undertaking.

A different approach to Homeric times is taken by E.R. Dodds in his book *The Greeks and the Irrational*50. He is dealing with religion and its psychology in Homer. Once again, however, the perspective taken is one that details the externalist perspective in morality. He examines the growth and meaning of the terms *ate, moira* and *menos* in the epics. When Agammenon compensated himself for the loss of his own mistress by robbing Achilles of his, he evaded responsibility by saying that the god Zeus had put ‘wild *ate*’ in his understanding51. This excuse would be readily acceptable, not

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49 MacIntyre, A., p. 8.
51 Dodds, E.R., p. 3.
only by Agammenon, but by Achilles because under the received account early Greek justice cared nothing for intent – it was the act that mattered. This, indeed, is the position that we set ourselves against. He is abrogating moral responsibility and thrusting blame onto the gods. But Homer makes his own position clear having Nestor presents the case from the perspective of practical reasonableness. On the other hand, he is not dishonestly inventing a moral alibi, because the victim of his action takes the same view of it as he does, though not the one, we argue, that Homer intends. E. R. Dodds explains that *ate* means a temporary clouding or bewildering of the normal consciousness. He does not deal with the terms *agathos* and *arete*, but observes that in Homer man’s highest good is the enjoyment of *time*, (honour or public esteem). Once again, this is a powerful presentation of the externalist perspective in Homer.

According to Dodds, the most powerful moral force known to Homeric man is not the fear of God, but, rather the fear of ridicule from his fellow man. Man lived in a shame culture where public opinion was the paramount consideration, as is reflected in the use of the terms *aidos*, (shameful): *aideomai*, (I shame myself). The reflexive use of the verb *aideomai* is the only one that occurs in the Homeric epics. However, the reflexive usage seems to suggest that there is more to shame culture than what other people will think of one’s actions. The use of *aideomai* implies a consciousness in the agent of having done something shameful before the perception of his act registers with onlookers. In failing to consider the etymology of the verb *aideomai* and the consequences of the use of the reflexive tense of it in the Homeric epics, Dodds misses an opportunity to penetrate beneath the philological level at which he

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52 Dodds, E.R., p. 3.
53 See our discussion on p. 22.
54 Dodds, E.R., p. 5.
has set his investigation and present a deeper psychological insight into the morality
tale. Had the transitive of the verb been in use in Homer it would have suggested a
person outside of the speaker and thus been a judgement of somebody else’s conduct
rather than one’s own.  

Again the importance of time and its inseparability from the shame culture is
indicated in several important passages in the Iliad, for example, Hector showing that
he values time above all else when before going out to fight Achilles he says to
Andromache as she urges him to remain in safety within the walls of Troy:

“...I feel shame, (aideomaie) before the Trojans, both men and women, if like kakos I skulk
away from the wall."

Wender seems to agree when she says:

“The sense of shame, aidos is important ... For the early Greeks, shame – the fear that one’s
peers would think badly of one – was what kept a man from wrong doing."

Time is important to Helen when she says to Hector of Paris ... “would ... that I had
been wife to a better man – to one who could smart under dishonour (atime), and
mens’ evil speeches. Helen was reflecting on the hesitation of her beloved to
follow Hector into battle.

However, this is not the only way in which the term ate was used. It involved any
mental lapse that could be ascribed to the agency of an external daimon or higher
power. An example is found when Glaucus swapped gold armour for bronze.  

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56 In English the transitive verb ‘shame’ means to cause to feel shame; to disgrace. Blackies’ Compact
Etymological Dictionary, Blackie & Son Ltd, London and Glasgow, p. 295. Nevertheless this
argument may be countered with the idea that the shame one feels is nevertheless still attributable to
the social context.
59 Iliad 6.351.
60 Dodds, E.R., p. 4.
Homer the source of *ate* is often attributed to daimonic agency\textsuperscript{61}. This is clearly illustrated in Agamennon’s dream\textsuperscript{62}. Zeus sent a dream to Agamennon to tell him to prepare his Achaean forces for battle against the Trojans at once, despite knowing from a previous message of the gods that they could not win without Achilles. Zeus told the dream to assume the identity of Nestor, Agamennon’s most valued and trusted councillor. Agamennon was under no illusion that he was asleep in his bed since the dream figure makes sure to point this out to him: “you are asleep”, son of Atreus, says the dream in Iliad II\textsuperscript{63}. The problem presented to the dreamer in Homeric times was whether the dream figure was being deceptive or not. This difficulty is the same one that Glaucus underwent and always provides an escape route for the dreamer. If things don’t work out it is because of the daimonic origin or *ate* in the dreamer. In effect the dreamer claims daimonic possession, albeit temporarily.

Thus these errors of judgement caused by *ate* escaped being described as wickedness or indeed any form of moral imperfection. The result of *ate*, a psychological state induced by the gods, is simply a fact of life. We can see the beginnings of moral judgements, again, bad judgements, in the description of *ate* and its effects. For the Greeks *ate* was a moral buffer between the person or agent and the effect of his actions. Because, as the story goes, he was not acting out of free will when in a state of *ate*, he could not be responsible for anything that occurred. But, it is precisely this

\textsuperscript{61} Dodds, E.R., p. 5.
\textsuperscript{62} *Iliad*, 2.1.
\textsuperscript{63} Quoted in Dodds, E.R., p. 105
point that Homer calls into question by pointing to the difficulties associated with inner conflict and how they must be weighed by reason.\(^{64}\)

Another term examined by Dodds is *Moira* which he describes as an inexplicable disaster as part of man’s “portion” or “lot” in life, meaning simply that they cannot understand why it happened, but since it has happened, evidently it had to “be”\(^{65}\). *Moira* and *ate* are not synonyms, but *Moira* may follow from past actions performed while the agent was in a state of *ate*. Moreover, Patroclus attributes his death directly to an intermediate agent Euphorbus, and indirectly to Apollo, but from a subjective standpoint to his bad *Moira*. Once again, the term *Moira* offers yet another source of abrogation of responsibility in the epics, but as we have just shown, this runs counter to the whole thrust of reasonableness which Homer sets up as a palliative to such thinking.

Another form of psychic intervention considered by Dodds, which is just as common in Homer, is the communication of power from god to man. In the *Iliad* the typical case is the communication of *menos* during a battle. This *menos* is not physical strength, rather it is like *ate*, a state of mind.\(^{66}\) Dodds observes that often, communication of *menos* comes as a response to prayer,\(^{67}\) as in the injection of a triple portion of *menos* by Athena into the chest of Diomedes or when Apollo puts *menos* into the *thumos* (desire), of the wounded Glaucus.\(^{68}\) The exculpatory havens of *ate*, *moira* and *menos* provide the Greeks themselves with an excuse for lapses in conduct. We see this in Agamennon’s dream. Zeus is angry with him because of his

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64 See our discussion at pp. 21 - 22 regarding Nestor’s advice to Agamennon about not stealing the slave girl Briseis and at p. 24 concerning Phoenix’s advice to Achilles to put his quarrel with Agamennon behind him.
65 Dodds, E.R., p. 6.
68 Dodds, E.R., p. 8. See *Iliad* 16.529
treatment of Achilles in the ‘Briseis’ affair. It has resulted in social disorder brought on by Agammenon’s hubris, his display of the hyper moron principle. The fact that Zeus set about having the Achaeans slaughtered at their ships by sending the dream to Agammenon shows just how great an affront to Achilles, Agammenon’s conduct was.

Thus Adkins covers much the same ground and takes the same externalist perspective as MacIntyre and Dodds.

The common ingredient of these three terms examined by E.R. Dodds is that they enable the agent to escape responsibility. This is balanced by the fact that in respect of the term menos it also robs the agent of the kudos of his action. Either way, there is no internalist moral dimension to be found in the beliefs expressed by the use of the Greeks in any of these three terms.

In Adkins, agathos has in its normal use no internal moral connotation, and neither does arete. What is commended by these terms is military prowess and the skills which promote success in war together with that success which, is indistinguishable in the sociological perspective of Homer from the skills which contribute to it. As in the other authors MacIntyre and Dodds, there is no internalist moral perspective or ontological consideration of the content of Homer’s epics as a morality tale. They are simply concerned to describe the epics as an account of what the aristocratic class thought of itself.

Our reading is much closer to that presented by Eric Vogelin who argues that the epics provide us with a meditation on the sources of disintegration of the Mycenaean civilisation. We will show that Homer was not concerned about history simpliciter.

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69 We will discuss the hyper moron principle presently.
70 Adkins, p. 31.
nor, with creating a work of literature, but, rather with the Greek experience of order and its symbolisation. “In expressing a new experience of human existence ... of the nature of order and the causes of disorder, and of the historical decline and fall of a society ...”

71 Homer created a meditation on social order in which moral value is undergirded by a metaphysical/cosmological viewpoint which places at the centre stage, practical reasonableness. One of the literary devices he employs to achieve this is through his dialectic relating to scenery and constancy. Homer develops an impression of the world with the adjectives he uses to describe the natural phenomena, such as the fruitful earth,72 rose-fingered dawn and the ambrosial mysterious night. These adjectives do not only describe the dawn and the night, but become, and are one with them. Homer makes these qualities transcendental properties of the dawn and the night, thus, they become the quintessence of their quality and beauty. Homer is describing the dawn and the night in a far deeper and more meaningful and beautiful sense than he does the aristocracy. For the most part he is content to describe the aristocracy as *agathoi* and to talk of their *arete*, which, from the sociological/externalist perspective, are purely external qualities. And yet he is continually pointing to the ruptures in order associated with the external perspective. These literary devices capture something of the ontological excellence of the cosmos with respect to its order and beauty. However, man can in his own way replicate onto/cosmic order and beauty in his creative activities. In addition to this the world which Homer creates for his epic poetry to unfold is one in which every functional object can be excellently made.

73 [Paris and Helen] lay down together on a well-made wooden bed.
worthy and fine\textsuperscript{74}, the armour always well fitting and shining\textsuperscript{75}. The spear\textsuperscript{76} is always straight, stout, long and sharp\textsuperscript{77}, it fulfils the excellence of the kind of thing it is, its purpose\textsuperscript{78}. This complete setting implies a perfection that pervades the whole of the created order.

This well ordered world is portrayed to us through nature and inanimate things. Nature contains patterns of order that man ought not to interfere with and is an ever present reminder of the excellence of reality which may serve as a paradigm for both individual and social excellence for humans. It is perfectly proportioned, and, as Homer continues to remind us, very often beautiful beyond description. It is Homer’s mission to show us that we can achieve the same harmony in our individual and social lives. The inanimate objects in Homer are made according to the pattern of nature. They are the best that Greek patience and skill (\textit{techne}), can produce. The Greeks well knew that in order for something to achieve its \textit{telos}, (purpose for which it was made), it had to be well constructed, it had to have \textit{arete}, excellence in so far as it is the kind of thing it is. Thus, excellence is a metaphysical/ontological attribution of worth which coincides with the term \textit{agathos}. For the Greeks of Homeric time \textit{arete} meant goodness and excellence of any kind, this included, “of animals, things, and land ...”\textsuperscript{79}. These things including ships and spears and all other tools and utensils are made by man as well as he is able so that their \textit{arete} combined with the \textit{arete} of the maker produces the best work.

\textsuperscript{74} H., p. 137. At the moment [Achilles] is lying idol by his beat seagoing ship.
\textsuperscript{75} H., p. 88.
\textsuperscript{76} H., p. 73. With that he [Menelous] balanced his long shadowed spear and hurled it.
\textsuperscript{77} H., p. XIX.
\textsuperscript{78} H., p. 72. Last, he took up a powerful spear, which was fitted to his grip.
\textsuperscript{79} Liddell & Scott, p. 238.
In what follows we would like to explore, in our hermeneutic analysis how Homer presents us with a meditation on the sources of personal and social disintegration. Essentially the *Iliad* presents us with two stories:

(1) The elopement of Paris with Helen of Argos; and

(2) The rage of Achilles after Agammenon steals one of his prizes, which leads to the death in battle of his beloved, Patroclus.

We will urge that there are a key set of issues which drive the stories contained in the epics. These are the internalist aspects of virtue, the importance of practical reasonableness, the opposition of individual desire (the *hyper moron* principle) versus conduct that conduces to communal well being, and from the Gods’ point of view the patterns of disorder at the level of society which are an affront to them and the divine order of creation.

It is the elopement that causes the ostensible outbreak of the war. Helen and Paris have committed an act which brings instability to the very roots of Greek society. Paris, an aristocrat has enticed the wife of another aristocrat to leave him resulting in deep personal loss for Menelaus. It is not only the rupture of a family, which is the smallest and most socially stable unit in Greek society, but also an affront to Menelaus’ status, as the head of his family. Because Menelaus is an aristocrat the elopement has weakened the entire social fabric and caused a loss of face to the royal family. Each of these excesses of behaviour demonstrate the damaging effects of a man (and, in this case, a woman) not fulfilling their social functions. In Greek eyes Helen was worse than an *agathos* guilty of cowardice in battle, because she had taken an oath to fulfil her social function until the death of her husband the breakdown of her duty to him and society was irreparable. Helen had put her personal agenda of
passion over reasonableness. In all of the elements of Helen’s elopement we see the
dangerous consequences caused by people who adopt individualistic perspectives to
the detriment of their social and familial obligations. Menelaus had no choice but to
try to right the wrong that had been done to his family and his society. The only way
was to wage war on Troy and vindicate himself by killing Paris. All of this was
caused by the lack of reasonableness brought about by the interference of Paris in the
life of Helen and Menelaus. Paris’ and Helen’s complete disregard of their personal
and familial obligations had caused a rent in society that was to tear two countries
apart for over nine years of warfare. It was also to involve the gods as we shall see80
because it was an attack on the divinely ordained conception of the communal value
of xenia (friendship), which involved not only life in any given community but also
between communities. Xenia is a friendly relationship that is characterised by a
relationship towards an outsider, in connection with someone from a distant place.
The bond of the relationship would have existed between Helen and the people of
Paris’ kingdom and also between Paris and Menelaus, and his community. Both Paris
and Helen violated that friendly relationship by their elopement81 and as a result was
a direct attack upon a foundational concept of Greek community.

The next story in Homer’s morality tale, concerns the quarrel between Achilles and
Agammenon over a division of spoils, involving the theft of a girl called Briseis, who
was confiscated by Agammenon from Achilles, to the latter’s implacable rage. Their
feud weakens the Greek Army which suffers repeated defeats because Achilles
refuses to fight. Achilles’ beloved Patroclus is killed by Hector, whom later Achilles
kills in revenge. It is the death of Patroclus that spurs Achilles back into the fray, not

80 See our discussion at page 19 et seq.
81 Mooney, B.T., Perspectives on the Philosophy of Love and Friendship in Ancient Greece: Homer to
Plato, Ph D thesis. La Trobe University, 1993, p. 76.
because Achilles thinks it is appropriate behaviour, but because of an excess of rage (?holos) with Hector and grief for his beloved. This causes him to reconcile with Agamemnon and continue with the war. The characters of the Iliad all had a fine sense of dikaiosune (justice, righteousness), between themselves as is shown when Agamemnon intends to steal the slave girl Briseis from Achilles. Nestor says to him:

Agamemnon. Forget the privilege of your rank, and do not rob him [Achilles] of the girl. The Army gave her to him: let him keep his prize.

In this story too, we see activity generated for all the wrong reasons. Agamemnon steals Briseis which is a selfish and unreasonable act. He ought to have known that individual desire if not curbed in accordance with communal well being causes social dissension because he had just seen an example of it in the elopement of Paris and Helen. Again, Achilles should not have sulked the way he did over his loss because in so doing he put the lives of the men and his army in jeopardy. In withdrawing into himself he turned his back on his social obligations. What jolted him out of his petulant moroseness was not a realisation that he was behaving inappropriately, but rather, the encroachment of another negative emotion, namely, anger. He had lost all proportion. His only desire was to avenge Patroclus and kill Hector. He had forgotten the purpose for which the war was being waged and all because he took his eye off the communal game and decided to play a lone hand which involved a complete disregard for the interests of the community around him. Because of his rank this affected not only the members of the fighting forces but also their families at home.

Now while the secondary commentators see this story as being understood according to the externalist perspective, ate, menos and moira, it is nevertheless quite clear that

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82 Il., p. IX.
83 Il., p. 30.
Homer is advocating a moral internalist perspective and a socially responsible view of things. One indication of this occurs when Nestor hints very strongly that there is a broader dimension to the status of *agathos* than the external one, and that if this broader dimension is violated it will cause social and internal chaos, not only for the person at whom the unreasonable conduct is aimed but also for the perpetrator of it. In this case because of the majesty of Agammenon’s and Achilles’ ranks the quarrel causes dissension in the broader society as well. Nestor not only addresses Agammenon personally but brings in the social dimension of the situation by reminding him that ... “the army gave her to him” ... Here we see the warning that any unjust conduct will cause dissention on a more complex and deeper level in society, than just between the two antagonists concerned. Agammenon has the *arete* of his particular social function and is thus *agathos*, but Nestor’s exhortation not to deprive Achilles of his prize presages the presence of a future ingredient in the term *agathos*, that of *dikaiosune* (justice), which must also be tied to an account of reasonableness. Nestor is appealing to Agammenon’s sense of fair play not to interfere with the property of another. In Nestor’s plea to Agammenon, Homer shows that he will be guilty of going beyond the measure and acting *hyper moron*. Agammenon will be violating the internalist moral perspective which Homer puts in Nestor’s words and this in turn elaborates the theme of unreasonability by allowing his own individual desire to rise above the communal well-being. He is forgetting that when society makes rules it is not only for the protection of the individuals who live in it, but it also imposes upon its members, individually, the duty of maintaining those rules, the starting point of which is to have sufficient mastery of oneself to obey them. Agammenon is about to violate that principle, which is to act *hyper moron*. This expression relates to those who through their own fault add to their own destined
share of misery, and is derived from the word moros meaning destiny or fate. Hyper is a preposition, which when used with the accusative case as it is in the expression hyper moron means over or beyond. The expression is frequently used in Homer. The use of this term by Homer further illustrates his internalist perspective on morality. If a person acts hyper moron he will be increasing his misery because he will be interfering with not only his own equilibrium, but also with that of society around him.

A further example of the inner dimension of morality occurs in Hector’s criticism of his brother Paris. Paris was challenged to battle by Menelaus and avoided the encounter. Hector chided him because of his lack of courage:

How the long-haired Achaeans must laugh when they see us make a champion of a prince because of his good looks, forgetting that he has no strength of mind, no courage, one who was hanging his head in shame.

Hector was haranguing Paris for his cowardliness, which was the key flaw in his being agathos within the traditional aristocratic understanding. Agathia was a quality of looks, aristocratic position, and courage. It is only this last ingredient of agathia that can be lost. It is a blemish in the agathos of a man, which is not present in all of the other things both animate and inanimate in Homer’s world. Man is the only social rational creature in Homer’s world. Courage and cowardice are mutually exclusive choices and it is the choice that makes man agathos or shameful, (aischron). Paris has violated the standards of the aristocratic community by falling below the expected standard of conduct. This is a further indication in Homer that the agathos needs moral inner worth to be completely agathos. Implicitly, through Homer’s eyes,
Hector is pointing out that to be *agathos* is much more than having a certain social standing, that it requires, as it were, a motivational structure to behave in a certain way for good reasons.

A stronger indication of the internalist dimension of the virtues being present in Homer is found in Book IX of the *Iliad* where the old man Phoenix is set beside the young Achilles, as tutor and advisor. This is the first time that the question as to whether virtue can be taught arises in Greek history. Achilles is confronted by Phoenix, but his admonitory speech falls upon Achilles’ hard heart. Phoenix is trying to get Achilles to reconcile his differences with Agammenon. He commends Achilles to ... “keep a check on that proud spirit of yours; for a kind heart is a better thing than pride. Quarrels are deadly. Be reconciled at once; and all the Argives young and old will look up to you the more” . This is another critique of ‘going beyond the measure’, or acting *hyper moron*.

Phoenix was aware that the breakdown of social order is often depicted in terms of the individuals in a community pleasing themselves above the communal order. Going beyond the measure breaks the bond that ties human order to cosmic and divine paradigms. Again, we have the example of conduct which will have internal consequences for the agent and thus stifle his moral growth. In Homeric times the need for communal order was to be found in a typical Achaean Kingdom with its *basileus*, (king), *boule*, (council), and *agora*, (public assembly), of arms bearing free men. The manor was the centre of the settlement, and perhaps there was an *asty*, (town), attached to it. These little societies could only function well if they behaved like communal molecules orbiting the central nucleus of the manor. In this respect

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90 *H.*, p. 167-169.
91 Vogelin, p. 77.
the model of society mirrors the model of the cosmos. This necessitated each and every member bearing in mind the communal rules before s/he acted. Such human blemishes as *hubris*\(^{92}\), *hyper moron*, *pleonexia* or hardening one’s heart (*kardis*) would weaken the societal cohesion.

Another dimension illustrating the differences between Homer’s intentions and the externalist perspective in Homer’s morality tale is to be found in the treatment of Thersites by Odysseus. Thersites was a bandy-legged little man who was the ugliest foot soldier in the army. He was continually taking a rise out of Achilles and Odysseus. On one occasion he reproaches Agammenon for always wanting more booty... “My lord, ... what more do you want? Your huts are full of bronze, and since we always give you the first pick when a town is sacked, you have plenty of choicest women in them too ... it ill becomes you as our general to lead the army into trouble through such practices”\(^{93}\).

Odysseus reprimanded him saying, “Thersites, this may be eloquence but we have had enough of it. It is not for you ... to hold forth with the kings name on your tongue”. Odysseus then silenced Thersites by whacking him on the back with the royal sceptre. Thersites was censored because he was not *agathos*. What irritated Odysseus was that he thought Thersites was correct. Usually Homer gives lessons to the aristocracy from on high, from the gods. His purpose in doing so from a lowly soldier on this occasion is a further refinement to his attack upon the bastion of *agathia* monopolised by the aristocracy. Here Homer uncovers a curious paradox. He permits Thersites to reprimand his social betters and even makes Odysseus acknowledge his eloquence. Then he makes Odysseus silence Thersites by violence using the royal sceptre, the

\(^{92}\) Arrogance.
\(^{93}\) *Il.*, p. 46.
symbol of the full force of the nobility. In this exchange one sees the small, but very bright spark of the beginnings of freedom of speech acknowledged by Odysseus whilst he holds the supreme authority of the royal sceptre in his hand. Odysseus shows no reasonableness in his treatment of Thersites, however his actions are predictable. In this scene Homer reveals that the internalist aspects of virtue are present in everyone, regardless of social rank.

IV

The issues raised in this paper also pertain to the richer ontology that embraces the divine order in the Homeric epics. We have traced:

(a) The internal dimension of morality in the Iliad;

(b) How this internal dimension of morality fits into a conception of order, (kosmos), that embraces the ontological excellence of each element of the created order.

(c) This conception of order has been tied to a notion of human excellence, a rejection of modes of abrogation of responsibility ate, moira, and menos and to practical wisdom through rejection of behavioural excesses hyper moron, pleonexia and hubris;

However, the Gods too play their role in this. In the Iliad the Homeric Gods are represented as subject to similar levels of passion, disruption and disorder as in the

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94 See our discussion at page 20.
95 See our discussion at p. 12.
96 See our discussion at p. 15 - 16
97 See our discussion at p. 16
98 See our discussion at p. 26.
99 See our discussion at p. 28
100 See our discussion at p. 28.
world of human affairs. Indeed, disorders of individuals and disorders of society are reflected in disorder among the Gods\textsuperscript{101}, and vice versa.

However, Homer begins a meditation on a new theology by having the Gods discuss these matters in the \textit{Odyssey}. Throughout the \textit{Iliad} man had blamed the Gods for evil things that befell him, or he evaded responsibility by attributing unseemly behaviour to the Gods. The new Jovian order articulated at the beginning of the \textit{Odyssey}\textsuperscript{102} reflects Homer’s penetrating critique of the sources of personal and social disorder in the \textit{Iliad}.

After the Trojan War order (\textit{kosmos}) had in large part been restored among the Achaeans ... “all the survivors of the war had reached their homes by now and so put the perils of battle and the sea behind them”\textsuperscript{103}. Only Odysseus was prevented from returning to his home and family in Ithaca by the goddess Calypso. Odysseus was imprisoned on Calypso’s island presided over by Poseidon, the sea god. Poseidon had sworn to ... “pursue the heroic Odysseus with relentless malice to the day when he reached his own country”\textsuperscript{104}. Odysseus was temporarily on safe, dry land and thus free from harassment by Poseidon, but this represented only a temporary haven. The price of his safety was imprisonment by Calypso\textsuperscript{105} who puts her infatuation for Odysseus above his right to choose liberty for himself. Odysseus’ plight represented an imperfection in the divine order, particularly when viewed from the perspective of the Council of the Gods\textsuperscript{106}. Calypso was displaying the \textit{hyper moron} principle in detaining Odysseus for her own pleasure.

\textsuperscript{102} Od., p. 26.
\textsuperscript{103} Od., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{104} Od., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{105} Od., p. 25.
\textsuperscript{106} Od., p. 26.
In the opening of the *Odyssey* a Council was convened of all the Gods, except Poseidon who had gone to Ethiopia. The purpose of the Council was to make man responsible for his fate and not attribute blame for his actions to the Gods\(^{107}\). It was Zeus’ intention to put an end to man being able to escape responsibility by such manoeuvres captured in our earlier discussion of “*ate*”, “*menos*” and “*moira*”\(^{108}\). In addressing the Council he highlighted Agamemon’s return home from the Trojan War:

> What a lamentable thing it is that men should blame the Gods and regard us as the source of their troubles, when it is their own wickedness that brings them sufferings worse than any which destiny allots them. Consider Aegisthus, who flouted Destiny by stealing Agamennon’s wife, and murdering her husband when he came home, though he knew the ruin this would entail, since we ourselves had sent Hermes the keen-eyed Giant-slayer, to warn him neither to kill the man nor to make love to his wife. For Orestes, as Hermes pointed out, was bound to avenge Agamennon as soon as he grew up and thought with longing of his home. Yet with all this friendly council Hermes failed to dissuade him. Now Aegisthus has paid the final price for his sins\(^{109}\).

Athena then asserted that Aegisthus received the fate that he deserved and consigned all who act like him to a similar fate\(^{110}\). Aegisthus had defied the Gods and thus defiled the divine order. Athena judged Aegisthus’ actions as having been his own and in so doing hints at a retrospective judgement of all of the occasions during the *Iliad* when men had sought to evade responsibility for their evil deeds by projecting the cause of them on the Gods. Athena then put forward Odysseus’ cause\(^{111}\). In appealing for Odysseus’ freedom from Calypso, Athena calls him ... “the wise but unlucky” ... “who has been parted so long from all his friends”\(^{112}\). This was a new beginning for the Gods and man. Aegisthus who ignored the divine sanction against committing an act that would rent the fabric of the created order is no more. His *hubris* and violation of the *hyper moron* principle has brought him to his fate which


\(^{108}\) See our discussion at p. 12.


cannot be undone. Whilst Odysseus is “still alive and unlucky” he is still redeemable and does not deserve a fate different from the other warriors who are safe at home with their families.

Odysseus’ desire to return home provides the leitmotif for the Gods to assist man in working out the new theology in which man takes responsibility for his fate instead of evading that responsibility by ascribing his actions to the gods. This ushers in the inclusion of man’s nature into Homer’s created order, which is not only beautiful to behold (kalos), but also embodies an inner moral dimension in that it functions excellently. Odysseus’ desire to return home is the beginning of his journey into his own internal moral dimension. He has always been kalos because of his membership of the aristocracy, but he can only become agathos in the internalist moral sense of the term by restoring order within himself, his family and his kingdom. In order to command he must first learn to obey the divine order.

In the new theology set up by the Odyssey we see Homer dealing in the abstract qualities that make up the internalist moral dimension of man’s nature. He does this by using mythological language and his rich imagery to convey the abstract terms of goodness, (Agathia), and justice, (dikaiosyne), in the excellences of the world he creates. The excellence of the world man inhabits exhibits a perfection that is imbedded in an ontology of order which is reminiscent of the divine. In this new theology both man and the Gods become inseparably committed to the establishment of divinely created order, which is reflected in the triumphant home coming of Odysseus, his slaying of the suitors, and his restoration of social and political order in Ithaca.

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113 See our discussion p. 20.