RESEARCH ARTICLE

Virtues and Values in Ancient Human Civilizations: An study of Concepts and Perceptions

Kortali Nourreddine

Laboratory of Philosophical Studies and Issues of Man and Society in Algeria

Algeria

Email: nourreddine.kortali@univ-tiaret.dz Orcid: 0009-0007-1660-3278

Ramdani Hocine

Laboratory of Philosophical Studies and Issues of Man and Society in Algeria

Algeria

Email: hocine.ramdani@univ-tiaret.dz Orcid: 0009-0008-7191-0024

Hadjadj Khalil

Laboratory of Philosophical Studies and Issues of Man and Society in AlgeriaMohamed Boudiaf – Msila

Algeria

Email: khalil.hadadj@univ-tiaret.dz Orcid: 0009-0006-6163-1123

Ahmed Douara

Laboratory of Philosophical Studies and Issues of Man and Society in Algeria

Algeria

Email: Ahmed.douara@univ-tiaret.dz (4) Orcid: 0000-0002-3741-1934

Doi Serial https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.6.55

Keywords virtues, values, civilizations, ethics, globalization

Abstract

The article explores virtues and values as fundamental elements in shaping human civilizations. It examines how the concepts and perceptions of virtues vary across cultures, analyzing the contributions of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle in shaping these ideas. The article highlights the importance of moral and social values in promoting social cohesion and interaction among individuals. It also discusses contemporary challenges facing traditional values in the context of globalization. Expected Outcomes: Enhanced understanding of the diversity of moral concepts across cultures. Reevaluation of the role of philosophers in shaping contemporary values. Insights on how to adapt to cultural changes in globalization. Stimulated discussion on ethical values in modern society. Suggested strategies for promoting positive values in communities.

Citation

Kortali N., Ramdani H., Hadjadj Kh., Ahmed D. (2025). Virtues and Values in Ancient Human Civilizations: An study of Concepts and Perceptions. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(6), 522-527; doi:10.56352/sei/8.6.55. https://imcra-az.org/archive/364-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-6-volviii-2025.html

| Received: 11.01.2025 | Accepted: 14.04.2025 | Published: 01.05.2025 (available online) |

Introduction:

Virtues and values are among the most significant philosophical and intellectual issues, which is why philosophers, religious scholars, legal experts, and moral theorists have dedicated substantial discourse to their major problems and diverse conceptual frameworks. Thus, writing a philosophical and civilizational history is both a scientific and ethical responsibility. It goes beyond recounting military battles, narrating past events, or highlighting the roles of prominent figures to emphasize the moral and human values that prevailed throughout different historical eras. Across various ages, a set of values crystallized, forming a prominent landmark in the lives of human societies—values that advocated tolerance, love, justice, mercy, and reform.

However, this study does not seek to delve deeply into any one of these virtues. Instead, it attempts to shed light on the extent to which human values and virtues existed in ancient civilizations—particularly those that did not witness the emergence of philosophy or science, meaning those predating the Greek era. Additionally, it examines humanity's ability to establish a robust ethical system not rooted in divine religious texts such as Islam, Christianity, or Judaism. All of this will be addressed through an analysis of the following problematic: How was the ethical and social fabric of ancient civilizations distinguished, and to what extent did it embody higher values and virtues? What were the key references and foundations upon which these values were built?

1. The Diverse Foundations of Ethical Values Throughout History

Ethics has long provoked profound philosophical inquiries regarding its true origin and source. Philosophical interpretations are divided into two main approaches: naturalist theories and rationalist theories, each offering distinct perspectives on how moral values emerge.

Naturalist theory posits that ethics stems from instinct and human evolution, viewing morality as a response to biological and social needs to ensure survival. In contrast, rationalist theory suggests that moral values are based on logical and rational reasoning, making them independent of natural or biological conditions. Naturalist theory tends to perceive ethics as a dynamic process influenced by societal changes and needs, whereas rationalist theory regards morality as universal, fixed, and immutable.

By exploring these theories, it becomes evident that ethics is not merely a set of laws or norms but a complex system reflecting intellectual diversity and differing perspectives. These variations open new horizons for a deeper understanding of ethics and its role in shaping human behavior [1].

Thus, the natural theory posits that morality evolved in response to the fundamental needs humans faced since ancient times. Early primitive societies relied on values such as cooperation and altruism to ensure survival in harsh environments. Moral behaviors—such as aiding others, protecting the vulnerable, and collective labor—were integral to survival strategies that reinforced societal stability. According to proponents of this theory, morality is not merely a cultural phenomenon but an innate trait that developed over generations to ensure biological and social success. Moral values functioned as tools for survival and adaptation to environmental and social changes. Even today, these ancient moral values continue to play a crucial role in guiding behavior, manifesting in modern practices such as volunteering and cooperation. By understanding morality as part of natural evolution, we uncover how biological and social interactions shaped the ethical principles we live by today, making this theory foundational for comprehending the relationship between morality and human nature.

On the other hand, the rational theory asserts that morality is primarily based on logical reasoning, rendering it universal and immutable. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant is among the most prominent advocates of this theory, having developed the concept of the "categorical imperative" as an ethical principle governing actions. Kant argues that moral actions must be universalizable—meaning they should be applicable as a general rule followed by all individuals. According to this theory, reason is the source of moral values, enabling humans to distinguish right from wrong independently of environmental or cultural circumstances. Rational morality regards individuals as rational beings capable of making decisions based on fixed and logical principles. This approach reinforces the idea of individual responsibility and autonomy, where each person bears the consequences of their moral choices. Additionally, rational theory establishes a foundation for building just and egalitarian societies, where moral values are treated as universal standards applicable to all. Through this perspective, rational morality represents a profound philosophical framework for interpreting human behavior beyond instincts or social pressures.

2- Virtues and Morality – Ma'at – in Ancient Egyptian Civilization :

1-2The term "morality" (or khuluq) is derived from a verb meaning "to shape," "to form," or "to construct." In early times, it was used specifically to describe the work of a potter shaping clay vessels on a wheel. Over time, this term evolved among the ancient Egyptians, undergoing metaphorical transformations in language that paralleled social developments. As Breasted notes, this evolution culminated in a new system articulated by Egyptian moral sages through the concept of Ma'at, which signifies "truth," "righteousness," "justice," and "truthfulness." Along-

[1] Masoud Zahir: The Value System and Its Impact on the History of Civilizations, pp. 143-144

side these terms, "conscience" and "morality" stand as enduring legacies of this transition, which emerged in human history as documented in ancient Egyptian records dating between 3000 and 2000 BCE. In this unprecedented historical shift—the first of its kind on Earth, and perhaps in the known universe the Egyptians were the pioneers who uncovered morality[2]

**However, this Egyptian discovery—fortunately—was not confined to the Egyptians alone. It was transmitted to the Canaanites of Palestine, and from there, it later reached the Hebrews. The most remarkable revelation in this regard was the realization that the Wisdom of Amenemope, preserved in an Egyptian papyrus housed in the British Museum, had been translated into Hebrew in ancient times. As it spread throughout Palestine, it became the source from which an entire section of the Book of Proverbs in the Torah was derived.

This discovery added profound significance to the fact that the civilizational progress of the kingdoms surrounding Palestine predated Hebrew advancement by several millennia. It became abundantly clear that the social and moral progress achieved by humanity in the Nile Valley—three thousand years earlier than that of the Hebrews—actively contributed to the formation of Hebrew literature, which we refer to as the Torah. Thus, our moral heritage is derived from a far more extensive human past, one that significantly predates that of the Hebrews. This heritage did not descend to us directly from the Hebrews but rather came through them. In truth, humanity's ascent toward social ideals occurred long before what theologians call the age of revelation, and this ascent was the result of social experience cultivated by humanity itself, not introduced into this world from an external source. The fact that early human moral ideas emerged from personal social experience holds profound implications for contemporary thinkers (3).

Perhaps these conclusions, drawn from the scholar's historical analysis of ethics—as well as our own examination of the history of morality, as we shall see—compel us to assert that ethics, or virtues and values, are fundamentally social and human in origin[3].

2.2 The Emergence of the Concept of Happiness and the Decline of the Pyramid Ideology :

The pyramids of Giza represent the pinnacle of belief in the absolute efficacy of material means to ensure the deceased's happiness in the afterlife. Through these colossal structures, along with the art of mummification, the royal body was believed to resist decay purely by physical means, triumphing over the forces that prevent immortality through sheer mechanical power. However, subsequent developments, marked by complex historical shifts, led to a simplification of practices. By the reign of the last king of the Fifth Dynasty (around 2625 BCE), pyramid texts were inscribed within smaller pyramids, signaling the rise of a new belief in happiness and bliss existing in another realm of the afterlife. This shift suggests, to some extent, that massive architectural constructions could not grant eternal life—rather, it had to be attained through spirituality. Thus, the dawn of an ethical age approached, one that would nullify the achievements of the pyramid builders[4].

This bliss, as will become evident, could only be attained in a distant kingdom—intended to signify heaven...

3-2 The Emergence of Moral Responsibility and the Concept of Monotheism

With the rise of the modern Egyptian state, a rapid and profound development emerged, reflecting the growing sense of personal responsibility among Egyptians for their own morality. At that time, Egyptians believed that moral responsibility was fundamentally tied to individual awareness and understanding. However, the center of this awareness, as conceived by the ancient Egyptians, was the heart. The ancient Egyptians unified the concepts of the heart, mind, and conscience, viewing the heart—the conscious and vigilant mind—as the source of an individual's happiness.

James Breasted notes that during the Pyramid Age, Ptahhotep, the wise elderly vizier, referred to the heart as the center of responsibility and guidance. He stated: "The one who listens (to good advice) is beloved of God, while the one who does not listen is hated by God. It is the heart that makes a person attentive or inattentive." Furthermore, in Ptahhotep's teachings, a man's heart had become his guide—indeed, his conscience (9). This illustrates how the ancient Egyptians equated the heart, mind, and conscience.

Breasted further elaborates on his findings, stating: "Indeed, Ptahhotep's views on the heart as a wise guide persisted. By the fifteenth century, we find a courtier of the conqueror Thutmose III referencing his services..."

In reality, the languages of the ancient Egyptians, as well as those of the Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, and other ancient civilizations, had not yet developed sufficiently to provide precise concepts such as "morality" . Instead, it was sometimes expressed as "birth" or "fatherhood" . Similarly, the term "angel" was absent, and the word "gods" was used instead, though contextually, these gods were understood to be subordinate to the one true God.

The later emergence of the term "angel" in Mesopotamia (and possibly among the Magi) resolved a significant issue present in nearly all ancient religions: angels replaced minor deities, just as "creation" replaced "birth" . These two terms—"gods" and "birth"—recur frequently in ancient Egyptian religion and other religions, alongside descrip-

[2] Jalāl Shams al-Dīn: Virtues and Morals Among Ancient Peoples with Humanistic Religions, University Culture Foundation, Alexandria, Egypt, 1st edition, p. 20.

[3] James Henry Breasted: The Dawn of Conscience..., p. 39.

[4] James Henry Breasted: The Dawn of Conscience... p.46

tions of Amun as "the great god whom all other gods revere"—"You are the one who oversees all gods, and no god oversees you." (Breasted, 46). The ancient Egyptians described God as "the One, the Unique, who created all existence."

4-2 Justice, Integrity, Equality, and Dignity :

Among the virtues and values upheld by the ancient Egyptians and their pharaohs—and to which they were highly sensitive—was "justice." They insisted on its constant realization. In the Address of the Vizierate, delivered by the pharaoh upon appointing a vizier (equivalent to a modern prime minister), the pharaoh would admonish the vizier to uphold justice among the people, to avoid humiliating the populace, and to refrain from flattering princes, advisors, or nobles. This indicates that the pharaoh was not oblivious to potential abuses of power.

The pharaoh would instruct this high-ranking official: "Know that the vizierate is not a sweet-tasting position. Understand that it does not entail showing deference to princes and advisors, nor does it permit the vizier to enslave the people. When a complainant comes to you—whether from Upper Egypt, Lower Egypt, or any other region—ensure that everything is conducted in accordance with the law and established custom, so that each person receives their due rights. Know that the prince holds a prominent position, and that water and air bear witness to all his actions. Nothing he does remains hidden."

The pharaoh would then caution the vizier against tyranny and bias, saying: "Do not forget to judge with justice, for bias is an act of tyranny against God. This is the instruction I give you—act accordingly. Treat those you know and those you do not know equally, and regard those close to the king the same as those distant from him. Know that the prince who adheres to this will endure in his position... Do not be angered by a man whose case you have not carefully examined[5].

3. Virtues and Values in Persian Culture

Numerous beliefs and schools of thought spread in Persia (Iran), the most prominent of which were Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, alongside other less significant doctrines such as Mazdakism and others. It is widely accepted that there is little known about pre-Zoroastrian Iran, as the oldest texts date back only to Zoroaster himself. Below, we will discuss Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism.

When Zoroaster reached the age of thirty—as reported by Al-Shahrastani—God Almighty sent him as a prophet and messenger to the people. He called upon King Vishtaspa, who accepted his religion. His teachings revolved around the worship of God, the rejection of Satan, the promotion of virtue, the prohibition of vice, and the avoidance of impurities. Clearly, the injunction to "enjoin good and forbid evil and avoid impurities" represents the behavioral aspect of Zoroastrian doctrine, all of which are virtues. This indicates that virtues and values in Zoroastrianism are intrinsically linked to religion.

Zoroastrians believe that light and darkness are two opposing principles, and that the Creator is the originator of both, having no partner, adversary, or equal. Darkness should not be attributed to Him, and thus, Zoroaster is not considered a dualist—one who posits two independent origins of existence. Instead, Zoroaster believed that God consists of three hypostases: the Wise Lord, Truth, and the Beneficent Spirit. It is said that Zoroaster authored a book called the Zend Avesta, from which his followers were termed Zanadiqa (heretics), meaning "the people of the Zend." According to Al-Shahrastani, Zoroastrians, like many other sects, believed in the return of a savior who would fill the world with justice and eradicate oppression[6].

The connection between Zoroastrianism and moral virtues is further explored by Breasted in his book The Dawn of Conscience. Zoroastrian doctrine clearly categorizes ethical life into good and evil, presenting a dualistic system that calls upon every individual to align themselves with one of two forces: either filling their soul with goodness and light or succumbing to evil and darkness. These forces were represented in living beings, and whichever path a person chose, they would be held accountable for it in the afterlife. The concept of posthumous judgment—previously unknown in Western Asia before Zoroaster—has led to the strong theory that Zoroaster borrowed much of his religious framework from ancient Egyptian religion. Evidence for this is found in an inscription observed by Breasted on one of the columns of Cyrus's palace in Pasargadae, depicting a tall, semi-divine figure with magnificent outstretched wings. Above this winged figure was the crown of Osiris, the Egyptian god of judgment in the afterlife. Thus, as Breasted asserts, it is nearly certain that the Zoroastrian concept of posthumous judgment was derived from the ancient Egyptians[7].

Upon examining the virtues and values in Zoroastrianism through the available sources, we find that they are presented in an abstract manner. When Zoroaster speaks of good, he does so in general terms, without specifying particular virtues such as truthfulness, honesty, filial piety, or kindness to the weak. The same applies to his discussion of evil, where he refrains from providing concrete examples. This stands in contrast to the ancient Egyptians and their pharaohs, who elaborated on virtuous deeds in detail. A similar tendency—speaking of good in general terms—is observed among Hindus, Buddhists, and Greco-Roman philosophers.

Now, let us examine Zoroaster's virtues and values through his invocations, the sole source available to me for this purpose:

[5] James Henry Breasted: Dawn of Conscience ... p. 61

[6] Al-Shahrastani: Al-Milal wa al-Nihal (The Book of Sects and Creeds), Part 1, p. 52

[7] James Henry Breasted: The Dawn of Conscience, p. 84

Zoroaster's Invocations

In these invocations, Zoroaster repeatedly acknowledges God's power and greatness, seeking His aid in spreading good and ensuring the triumph of Zoroaster and his followers over evil. Zoroaster prays:

"Let the spirit of evil be extinguished, and let corruption be eradicated."

"You who guard yourselves through righteousness."

"The reward of the Beneficent Spirit, whose companion is the holy man."

"Who shall dwell in Your abode, O Lord?"

In these prayers, Zoroaster calls upon his followers—those who adhere to righteousness and virtue—to let the spirit of evil fade away and to combat corruption until it is destroyed. Those who heed this call will be rewarded with a dwelling place in paradise with the Lord. In the same hymn, Zoroaster declares:

"These are the faithful, the benefactors of mankind, who strive in their deeds, supported by the Beneficent Spirit, to execute the judgment You have decreed."

1-4 First: The Sages of China :

A. Duke Jiè (845 BCE)

Freedom of Opinion

This sage emerged approximately 150 years after the Buddha's era and was particularly concerned with the freedom of the people. He articulated practical views on liberty in a speech delivered before King Lì Wáng around 845 BCE, outlining the criteria by which a king's success in governing his country could be measured. Among the key points of his speech were:

"An emperor knows how to rule when poets are free to compose verse, the people are free to perform plays, historians are free to speak the truth, ministers are free to offer counsel, the poor are free to complain about taxes, students are free to learn openly, workers are free to praise their skills and seek employment, the populace is free to discuss all matters, and elders are free to criticize everything. These criteria revolve around a single virtue: freedom of opinion."

It is well known that freedom of opinion is a fundamental pillar of democracy[8].

B. Mencius :

Freedom, Peace, and Virtue :

Mencius, who came after Confucius, held freedom in such high regard that he advocated for the people's right to revolt—even proclaiming this principle in the presence of kings. He condemned war, viewing it as a crime, and shocked the hero-worshippers of his time by declaring:

"There are those who say, 'I am skilled in marshaling troops, I am expert in conducting battles.' These are great criminals."

Elsewhere, he asserted: "There is no such thing as a just war." He also denounced the extravagance of royal courts, sharply rebuking those who fed their dogs and pigs while allowing people to starve. When one king claimed he could not prevent famine, Mencius replied that he should abdicate.

Mencius was so forthright in his reverence for free speech that when King Xuān once asked him about the qualities of great ministers, Mencius responded:

"If the king commits grave errors, they must oppose him. If he refuses to heed their repeated admonitions, they must depose him[9].

In his teachings to rulers, Mencius emphasized virtue, striving to outline a path for righteous living. He believed that governance should be entrusted to the virtuous, holding as his fundamental principle that human nature is inherently good—contrary to Hobbes' later assertions. According to Mencius, social problems arise not from human nature but from corrupt governance. Thus, he argued that philosophers should become kings, or kings should become philosophers. A just ruler, in his view, should not wage war against foreign lands but instead combat the common enemy: poverty. For poverty and ignorance, he believed, are the root causes of crime.

C. Mozi (450 BCE)

Universal Love and Compassion :

Mo Di (Mozi), who was born shortly after Confucius, was, in a sense, a Christian before Christianity. He loved all people and was willing to sacrifice his entire body, from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet, if it would benefit humanity. As Durant notes, it was as if he preached the message of Christ more than four centuries before Christ's advent. In the introduction, we discussed the significance of love as a crucial moral force. Mozi rejected Confucian thought—which he considered idealistic and impractical—and instead called for universal love among all people. Comprehensive love, in his view, was the only solution to social problems. If love were to pervade the world, it would undoubtedly create an ideal society and universal happiness, where people would treat one another with kindness—where the strong would not oppress the weak, the majority would not exploit the minority, the rich would not despise the poor, the powerful would not belittle the humble, and the cunning would not deceive the naive[10].

2-4 Japanese Sages

Naturally, after discussing Asian thought and Chinese sages, we turn to Japanese philosophers, whose ethical

[8] Jalāl Shams al-Dīn: Virtues and Ethics Among Ancient Peoples with Humanistic Religions, p. 66

[9] Jalāl Shams al-Dīn: Virtues and Ethics Among Ancient Peoples with Humanistic Religions, p. 73

[10] Will Durant: The Story of Civilization, Part 7, p. 253

perspectives diverge from Buddhism but align with their own metaphysical views.

A. The Sage Nakae

Conscience:

The philosopher Nakae, who resembles Spinoza, posited the existence of a universal conscience—a concept rooted in pantheism that periodically emerges in philosophical and mystical thought. Nakae distinguished between two realms: the material world (the world of objects) and the world of conscience. He asserted that the human mind is part of the world-mind, governed by rational logic, but there exists another aspect of the mind—the conscience—which transcends the material world. This conscience is infinite and eternal because it embodies the divine or cosmic intellect. By guiding our actions according to conscience, we attain an eternal and boundless existence, achieving immortality. Nakae's primary contribution to ethics lies in his exploration of conscience, proclaiming that those who follow it will live eternally[11].

B. Ogyū Sorai

Conscience as a Human Construct:

Unlike Nakae, some Japanese philosophers, such as Ogyū Sorai, rejected the notion of conscience as divine or cosmic. Instead, Sorai viewed conscience as a purely human invention—a practical construct devised by reason. Similar to Hobbes, Sorai believed that humans are inherently selfish and that only ethics and laws, established by wise rulers, can cultivate acceptable citizens. He argued that desires arise in humans from birth, and when these limitless desires go unfulfilled, conflict ensues, leading to chaos. Ancient kings, despising disorder, established principles of propriety and integrity to restrain human impulses. Thus, morality is merely a tool for governing imperial subjects—not innate or stemming from human emotion, but a deliberate creation of an intelligent elite sanctioned by the state.

In this study, we do not dismiss any particular source of moral obligation. What matters is the existence of ethics, regardless of their origin—even if they are artificially constructed. Indeed, the deliberate establishment of ethics imposes greater responsibility on individuals in recognizing values[12].

While these sages differed in their views—Mozi advocating universal love, Nakae emphasizing divine conscience, and Sorai treating conscience as a human construct—they all explored ethical life as a path to human happiness. Operating outside revealed religion, they shouldered moral responsibility themselves. Remarkably, their virtues and values largely align with divine revelation, except in rare instances, such as the right to revolt against corrupt rulers (as seen in Mencius)—a notion not explicitly found in revealed religions.

Next, we turn to Greece to examine their values and virtues.

5. Virtues and Values in Ancient Greece :

Like all pagan peoples, the ancient Greeks practiced a polytheistic religion with numerous deities, the most prominent of whom was Zeus, while the other gods held lesser status. Notably, the minor deities in pagan theological structures parallel the role of angels in monotheistic traditions. Each city-state had its own patron deities and distinct religious practices, which could vary significantly from those of other regions. For instance, the Minoans (3500–1000 BCE) may have been perceived as harsh or even barbaric, yet they were undoubtedly religious, adhering to a syncretic belief system that combined fetishism and superstition with idealism and the veneration of gods. Their worship extended to mountains, caves, the number three, trees, pillars, celestial bodies (the sun and moon), goats, serpents, doves, and bulls—leaving little exempt from their reverence. They believed the air was filled with spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, and from their traditions emerged the Hellenic concept of ethereal woodland spirits (some male, some female).

A. Deceit and Cruelty :

This section examines certain virtues prevalent during the Achaean period (1300–1100 BCE) that later fell out of favor. These traits, once esteemed, were eventually abandoned as societal needs evolved. Among them were treachery, deceit, and brutality. As Durant notes, the Achaeans were characterized by their penchant for plunder and slaughter, devoid of moral restraint. They took pride in deception without shame; Odysseus, for example, rarely spoke without falsehood or acted without betrayal. Those Achaeans who did not engage in such behavior nevertheless admired Odysseus, viewing him as a paragon of virtue. Even the goddess Athena, as depicted in The Iliad, praises his deceit, considering it among his admirable qualities.

Durant offers a contextual explanation for these ethics: "The moral standards of the Achaeans differed from ours as much as the virtues of war differ from those of peace. The Achaean man lived in a turbulent world of strife and hunger, where each individual had to guard himself, perpetually armed with bow and spear, capable of calmly witnessing spilled blood... Finding little security even in his homeland, the Achaean felt no obligation to respect it abroad, believing it his right to prey upon the weak. To him, the highest virtue lay in cunning paired with courage and ruthlessness. Notably, the Greek word for 'virtue' (ἀρετή) derives from 'manliness' and the attributes of Ares (Mars)."

This underscores the sociological nature of virtues: they emerge within specific societies to fulfill functional roles. When a society undergoes transformation and no longer requires certain virtues, it discards them. Indeed, virtues that persist beyond their utility may even be reclassified as vices, punishable by social censure or legal sanction—where once they were rewarded. Thus, virtues and values

[11] James Henry Breasted: Dawn of Conscience, p. 92
[12] Will Durant: The Story of Civilization, Part 3, p. 143

are structural, embedded within social frameworks, and inseparable from their environmental, ecological, and historical contexts. They cannot be judged in isolation but must be evaluated within the specific society that cultivated them.

However, this ethical paradigm did not endure unchanged in Greece. As we shall see, the subsequent post-Achaean period witnessed a dramatic shift in Greek virtues and values. Moreover, even the Achaean era was not devoid of admirable qualities.

B. Compassion and Generosity :

In the Homeric epics, which depict the Achaean "Age of Heroes," life was marked by material poverty but vigorous labor—a culture lacking in philosophical reflection, too young and rugged to prioritize ethics or metaphysics. This supports the view that virtues and values develop gradually. Yet, as Durant observes, "we cannot deny the presence of tender and compassionate moments in this culture." Warriors displayed mutual kindness, and the bond between father and son was profound, if understated. Consider Odysseus, who, upon his long-awaited return, kisses the heads and shoulders of his household, while they reciprocate with equal warmth. Similarly, Menelaus and Helen weep upon learning that Telemachus—the noble son of the lost hero Odysseus, who fought for their cause—has come of age.

Hospitality was another cornerstone of Achaean virtue. Strangers and supplicants were considered under Zeus's protection. Hosts would wash their guests' feet or anoint them with oils, provide fresh garments, and offer food and shelter to those in need. Durant remarks that such scenes reveal "a humanity and tenderness inevitably obscured in The Iliad by the clamor of weapons and the fog of war[13].

C / The Sanctification of the Human Self:

It is well-known among ancient civilizations that their deities favored human sacrifices. However, as humanity advanced, so did its gods, who ceased to demand human offerings and instead accepted animal sacrifices—such as cattle, sheep, and others. Greece was no exception in this regard. Durant recounts how the seed of rejecting human sacrifice was planted among the Greeks, stating:

When Pelopidas, one of the commanders, dreamed on the eve of the Battle of Leuctra (371 BCE) that he was being commanded to offer a human sacrifice on the altar as the price of victory, some of his advisors urged him to comply, while others opposed the idea, arguing that such a barbaric act, devoid of all piety and righteousness, could never be acceptable to the higher beings. They contended that the rulers of the earth were not titans or demons but rather the father of gods and all creation. It would be absurd, they maintained, to conceive of deities or supreme powers who delighted in slaughter and human sacrifice.

We consider this a significant moral leap in humanity's arduous journey toward refined sensibilities, aligning with the teachings of divine religions. However, some argue that humanity still has a long way to go regarding the issue of bloodshed.

Greek ethics soon underwent a profound transformation due to the transmission of the Indian doctrine of reincarnation to Greece through Orpheus of Asia, the founder of the Orphic tradition. The mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras was among the first Greeks to embrace this doctrine, establishing a secretive society devoted to it. Naturally, this belief was kept clandestine, as it diverged from mainstream Greek religion. Nevertheless, it was later adopted covertly by prominent philosophers.

What concerns us here from the Orphic tradition is its emphasis on virtues such as purity, chastity, and others. Admission into the Pythagorean society required not only physical purification through abstinence and restraint of desires but also mental purification through the study of science.

Here, we observe that chastity was no longer merely a ritual practice, as in Greek religion or some other faiths. Regarding the Orphic concept of purification, the soul undergoes a period of cleansing in Hades after death before returning to earth and entering a new body, then another, in an endless cycle of reincarnation. This cycle only ceases if the individual has lived a virtuous life, wholly free from vice. In this context, purification serves as a means of salvation, and the close connection between this doctrine and Hindu reincarnation is evident.

D / Conscience and Ethics:

Ethicists regard "conscience" as the backbone of virtues and values. While we will not delve into various perspectives on conscience, we will focus here on its explicit emergence among the Greeks—though we do not deny its implicit presence in all the virtues we have discussed or will discuss.

Democritus states: "Bodily strength is a mark of nobility only in beasts of burden, but strength of character is the mark of nobility in man. Good deeds must arise from conviction, not compulsion, and a man should perform them out of genuine desire rather than hope for reward. It is a man's duty to feel more shame before himself for committing evil than before the whole world."

Virtue According to Socrates:

Socrates emerged at the end of the Sophist era, recognizing that this school had created a perilous situation by undermining one of the foundational pillars of ethics: the supernatural. Socrates posed the crucial question: "Can ethics be established on a naturalistic basis?" In other words, if philosophy were to formulate a secular, non-religious moral law, could it save civilization—threatened by its own intellectual freedom—from collapse and ruin?

The answer was affirmative. Socrates even severed the connection between ethics and religion entirely when he

[13] Will Durant: The Story of Civilization, Part 4, p. 22

declared: "Goodness is not good because the gods approve of it; rather, the gods approve of it because it is good." Thus, "goodness" is a virtue attainable through reason. Consequently, for Socrates, knowledge is the highest virtue, all vice stems from ignorance, and righteous action is impossible without true understanding.

Virtue According to Plato:

Plato was deeply influenced by his teacher Socrates and adopted a rationalist perspective on virtue. For Plato, virtues were eternal intellectual truths and abstract ideals. Unsurprisingly, his conception of virtues falls within his theory of Forms, which encompasses all universal truths.

Plato spent considerable time attempting to formulate a natural moral law that would inspire people to righteousness without relying on heavenly rewards, purgatory, or hell. Thus, he had to depend on reason, which involved analyzing the human soul into its components and identifying the corresponding virtues.

He argued that children must be habituated to moderation and the ability to discern the golden mean in all matters, lest intelligence arrives too late to correct their course.

The Soul and the Origin of Life in Plato's Philosophy

According to Plato, the soul—or the essence of life—consists of three tiers or components: appetite, will, and intellect. Each of these components possesses its own distinct virtue. For appetite, the virtue is moderation; for will, it is courage; and for intellect, it is wisdom, to which piety and justice must be added, along with the fulfillment of one's duties toward parents and the gods. Justice, as Plato defines it, is the harmonious cooperation of parts within a whole—whether these parts are elements within ethics, citizens within a state, or faculties within the soul—whereby each component fulfills its proper function in the most complete manner (34).

These are the virtues and values upheld by Plato the philosopher. However, when considering Plato the man, as Durant notes, he was deeply religious and composed sacred hymns, though he later burned them, remaining a poet devoted to worship. His conception of the Good was imbued with a profound sense of beauty, and his piety was intertwined with ascetic devotion. In him, philosophy and religion were unified, and ethics merged with aesthetics. As he aged, he could no longer perceive beauty as separate from the Good and truth (35).

Plato's Conception of the Good

Socrates held that the essences (or defining attributes) of things were inherent in the things themselves. Since these things are subject to change and corruption, the truths derived from them are contingent and relative. Plato, however, rejected this view, asserting that the essences of things are immutable and impervious to change or decay. These essences do not reside in the objects themselves but in a transcendent realm he called the "Forms." These Forms serve as the principles of knowledge and the standards of judgment. The highest of these Forms is the Good, which is the source of existence and perfection. Thus, Plato diverged from Socrates by transcending the immanent essences of sensory objects and positing the existence of the Forms. In doing so, he eliminated the relativity of truth in epistemology and the relativity of values in ethics, rejecting the reduction of goodness to mere pleasure (36).

Plato also examined the notion of the Supreme Good. Socrates had identified the Good with happiness, considering it the ultimate aim of all moral action. Plato aligned with his teacher in rejecting the Sophistic conflation of virtue with individual pleasure and embraced the idea of happiness—though he explicitly linked happiness with justice (37).

Aristotle's Theory of Virtue :

Aristotle's perspective on virtue did not significantly depart from that of his teacher, Plato. He argued that wealth is not an end in itself but merely a means, satisfying only the miser. Since wealth is relative, it cannot provide lasting contentment. The key to happiness, according to Aristotle, lies in "activity"—exerting effort in a manner consistent with human nature and circumstances. Virtue is practical wisdom, the rational discernment of what constitutes the good, and it typically represents a mean between two extremes (38). Like Socrates and Plato, Aristotle regarded the Good as the essence of virtues and values. As Dr. Tawfiq al-Tawil notes, "Aristotle followed in the footsteps of Socrates and Plato, opposing pleasure as the ultimate goal of human actions and advocating happiness instead. He developed happiness into a precise and systematic philosophical doctrine. At the outset of his Nicomachean Ethics, he declared that the Good is that which all things aim for, thereby affirming teleology in human life. He asserted that ethics is a practical science directed toward an end, without which human action would be impossible" (39).

Regarding the relationship between happiness and virtue, as well as the interplay of sensation and reason in Aristotle's philosophy, his theory of contemplation elucidates this. In summary: "Since human nature combines animality and rationality, virtues are of two kinds—those pertaining to nutrition and sensation, and those pertaining to intellectual contemplation and abstract thought. The virtue of the first kind lies in subjecting desires and passions to the governance of reason, whereas the life of contemplation is far superior, elevating humanity to near-divine status" (40). The first kind of virtue is cultivated through habit and education, while the second arises through learning. Thus, legislators must train citizens in virtuous habits, as virtues are acquired through practice. When virtue becomes habitual, its exercise is accompanied by pleasure. Indeed, virtue is only truly virtuous when performed with ease and delight; if one finds it burdensome, it indicates a lack of readiness. Pleasure thus guides and accompanies virtue, which is why the self-disciplined individual finds joy in restraint (41).

Virtues and Values in Stoic Philosophy :

The Cynics adopted Socrates' principle of "self-mastery" as their behavioral doctrine, but the Stoics transformed it into the "suppression of desires" to serve their dual philosophical tenets: first, that the world is governed by an absolute law permitting no exceptions, and second, that human nature—what distinguishes humans from other beings—lies in rationality. These principles were encapsulated in their famous maxim: "Live in accordance with nature" (i.e., reason). This maxim had two dimensions: on one hand, humans were to emulate nature in its broadest sense, aligning with the laws of existence; on the other, they were to subject their behavior to nature in its narrower sense—reason (43). This principle reinforced the suppression of desires.

Thus, virtue became "living in accordance with reason," reducing morality to the rule of reason while excluding passion and individual will as motivators of human action. The Stoic sage consciously subordinates his life to the laws of the universe, viewing himself as a mere cog in the grand machine, moving in harmony with it (44). The Stoics held a rigid view of virtues and vices, asserting that "virtue alone is good, and vice alone is evil," with everything else being entirely neutral. Consequently, poverty, illness, pain, and death were excluded from the category of evil, while wealth, health, pleasure, and life were excluded from the category of good (45).

References

1. Al-Shahrastani: Al-Milal wa al-Nihal, Volume I. Dar Al-Ma'arifa, Beirut, Lebanon, 1993.
2. Jalal Shams Al-Din: Virtues and Morality Among Ancient Peoples with Humanitarian Religions. University Culture Foundation, Alexandria, Egypt, 2005.
3. James Henry Breasted: The Dawn of Conscience. Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, Egypt, 2012.
4. Masoud Daher: The System of Values and Its Impact on the History of Civilizations. Dar Al-Adab, Beirut, 1991.