

Ancient Greece: Heroic Traits TAE

Of all the traditional heroes of Ancient Greece, to the people of Athens, Theseus, an Athenian himself, was particularly popular. He represented, in a simple and straightforward way, what was then thought to be good and noble. The Hellenistic Greek biographer and moralist, Plutarch, drew a composite picture of him, carefully based on the most ancient surviving stories and accounts. From it we can gain some understanding of the history of beliefs about ethical behavior.

From Plutarch's Theseus:

King Aegeus, being desirous of children, and consulting the oracle of Delphi, received the celebrated answer which forbade him the company of any woman before his return to Athens. But, the oracle being so obscure as not to satisfy him that he was clearly forbid this, he went to Troezen, where King Pittheus, taking advantage from the obscurity of the oracle, prevailed upon Aegeus, it is uncertain whether by persuasion or deceit, to lie with his daughter Aethra. Aegeus afterwards, knowing her whom he had lain with to be Pittheus's daughter, and suspecting her to be with child by him, left a sword and a pair of shoes, hiding them under a great stone that had a hollow in it exactly fitting them; and went away making her only privy to it, and commanding her, if she brought forth a son who, when he came to man's estate, should be able to lift up the stone and take away what he had left there, she should send him way to him with those things with all secrecy, and with injunctions to him as much as possible to conceal his journey from every one...

When Aethra was delivered of a son, some say that he was immediately named Theseus, from the tokens, which his father had put under the stone; others that he had received his name afterwards at Athens, when Aegeus acknowledged him for his son. He was brought up under his grandfather Pittheus ...

Theseus, his mother Aethra conducting him to the stone, and informing him who was his true father, commanded him to take from thence the tokens that Aegeus had left, and sail to Athens. He without any difficulty set himself to the stone and lifted it up (**physical strength**); but refused to take his journey by sea, though it was much the safer way, and though his mother and grandfather begged him to do so (**daring and adventurous**). For it was at that time very dangerous to go by land on the road to Athens, no part of it being free from robbers and murderers...priding themselves in insolence, and taking the benefit of their superior strength in the exercise of inhumanity and cruelty, and in seizing, forcing, and committing all manner of outrages upon everything that fell into their hands...

Some of these, Hercules destroyed and cut off in his passage through these countries; but some escaping his notice while he was passing by, fled and hid themselves, or else were spared by him in contempt of their abject submission: and after that Hercules fell into misfortune, and... in Greece and the countries about it the like villainies again revived and broke out, there being none to repress or chastise them. It was therefore a very hazardous journey to travel by land from Athens to Peloponnesus; and Pittheus giving him an exact account of each of the robbers and villains, their strength, and the cruelty they used to all strangers, tried to persuade Theseus to go by sea. But he, it seems, had long since been secretly fired by the glory of Hercules, held him in

the highest estimation, and was never more satisfied than in listening to any that gave an account of him...

He thought it therefore a dishonorable thing, and not to be endured, that Hercules should go out everywhere, and purge both land and sea from wicked men, and he himself should fly from the like adventures that actually came in his way (**meets challenges straightaway**); disgracing his reputed father by a mean flight by sea (**brave**), and not showing his true one as good evidence of the greatness of his birth by noble and worthy actions, as by the token that he brought with him the shoes and the sword (**sense of duty**).

With this mind and these thoughts, he set forward with a design to do injury to nobody, but to repel and revenge himself of all those that should offer any. And first of all, in a set combat, he slew Periphetes, in the neighborhood of Epidaurus, who used a club for his arms, and from thence had the name of Corynetes, or the club-bearer; who seized upon him, and forbade him to go forward in his journey. Being pleased with the club, he took it, and made it his weapon, continuing to use it as Hercules did the lion's skin, on whose shoulders that served to prove how huge a beast he had killed; and to the same end Theseus carried about him this club; overcome indeed by him, but now in his hands, invincible (**prideful**).

Passing on further towards the Isthmus of Peloponnesus, he slew Sinnis, often surnamed the Bender of Pines, after the same manner in which he himself had destroyed many others before (**eye for an eye sense of justice**). And this he did without having either practiced or ever learnt the art of bending these trees, to show that natural strength is above all art.

The Crommyonian sow, which they called Phaea, was a savage and formidable wild beast, by no means an enemy to be despised. Theseus killed her, going out of his way on purpose to meet and engage her, so that he might not seem to perform all his great exploits out of mere necessity (**concerned with his image**); being also of opinion that it was the part of a brave man to chastise villainous and wicked men when attacked by them, but to seek out and overcome the more noble wild beasts. Others relate that Phaea was a woman, a robber full of cruelty and lust, that lived in Crommyon, and had the name of Sow given her from the foulness of her life and manners, and afterwards was killed by Theseus.

He slew also Sciron, upon the borders of Megara, casting him down from the rocks, being, as most report, a notorious robber of all passengers, and, as others add, accustomed, out of insolence and wantonness, to stretch forth his feet to strangers commanding them to wash them, and then while they did it, with a kick to send them down the rock into the sea (**reciprocal justice**).

In Eleusis he killed Cercyon, the Arcadian, in a wrestling match. And going on a little farther, in Erineus, he slew Damastes, otherwise called Procrustes, forcing his body to the size of his own bed, as he himself was used to do with all strangers; this he did in imitation of Hercules, who always returned upon his assailants the same sort of violence that they offered to him; sacrificed Busiris, killed Antaeus in wrestling, and Cynus in single combat, and Termerus by breaking his skull in pieces (whence, they say, comes the proverb of "a Termerian mischief"), for it seems Termerus killed passengers that he met by running with his head against them. And so, also, Theseus proceeded in the punishment of evil men, who underwent the same violence from him, which they had inflicted upon others, justly suffering after the manner of their own injustice. **The weapon of human ethics is reciprocity. It represents the innate human ethical sense of how to behave and how best to protect individual freedom and equality. It emphasizes give and take and**

represents the ethical ideal of fairness. All humans are emotionally urged to pay back good for good and bad for bad. Reciprocity is understood to be a universal human norm practiced by all people in all cultures. It is important for students to evaluate this innate drive in themselves, as well as to recognize it in others. Keep in mind that reciprocity is the engine of fairness and justice and that it is the only natural human ethical weapon. It will be employed as a matter of automatic response and must be tempered through reason since it can easily create vicious cycles.

Analyze Plutarch’s description of the Greek hero, Theseus. List as many characteristics as you can that reveal his basic ethical beliefs, and draw conclusions about why the Athenians admired him.

Theseus is strong, smart, brave, daring and resourceful. He practices a simple form of reciprocal justice and has a very strong sense of loyalty and duty to his group. He faces danger openly and unequivocally. There is never even a hint of doubt that he will stand and fight to the death if needs be. Right and wrong are clearly determined by “us and them” and there are no grey areas. Theseus was an ideal Heroic Age Greek hero.

Emerging later, Odysseus was a much more complex hero, and, like Theseus, he was also immensely popular with Athenian audiences, who never seemed to tire of stories about the Trojan War. Homer recorded the exploits of its greatest leader in his epic poems, The Iliad and The Odyssey. They can tell us much about the gradual evolution of the Ancient Greek understanding of ethics.

Returning from the war with Troy to find his home taken over by rivals and his wife, Penelope, the target of suitors seeking her hand in marriage and his throne, Odysseus secretly meets with his son, Telemachus, and some loyal servants.

From The Odyssey Chapter XVI

"I will tell you the truth, my son," replied Odysseus. "It was the Phaeacians who brought me here. They are great sailors, and are in the habit of giving escorts to anyone who reaches their coasts. They took me over the sea while I was fast asleep, and landed me in Ithaca, after giving me many presents in bronze, gold, and raiment. These things by heaven's mercy are lying concealed in a cave, and I am now come here on the suggestion of Minerva that we may consult about killing our enemies (**absolute sense of right and wrong**). First, therefore, give me a list of the suitors, with their number, that I may learn who, and how many, they are. I can then turn the matter over in my mind, and see whether we two can fight the whole body of them ourselves, or whether we must find others to help us (**strategic and calculating**)."

To this Telemachus answered, "Father, I have always heard of your renown both in the field and in council, but the task you talk of is a very great one: I am awed at the mere thought of it; two men cannot stand against many and brave ones. There are not ten suitors only, nor twice ten, but ten many times over; you shall learn their number at once. There are fifty-two chosen youths from Dulichium, and they have six servants; from Same there are twenty-four; twenty young Achaeans from Zacynthus, and twelve from Ithaca itself, all of them well born. They have with them a servant Medon, a bard, and two men who can carve at table. If we face such numbers as this, you may have bitter cause to rue your coming, and your revenge."

Now, therefore, return home early tomorrow morning, and go about among the suitors as before. Later on the swineherd will bring me to the city disguised as a miserable old beggar (**cunning and crafty**). If you see them ill-treating me, steel your heart against my sufferings; even though they drag me feet foremost out of the house, or throw things at me, look on and do nothing beyond gently trying to make them behave more reasonably; but they will not listen to you, for the day of their reckoning is at hand (**reciprocal justice**). Furthermore I say, and lay my saying to your heart, when Minerva shall put it in my mind, I will nod my head to you, and on seeing me do this you must collect all the armor that is in the house and hide it in the strong store room. Make some excuse when the suitors ask you why you are removing it; say that you have taken it to be out of the way of the smoke (**devious and manipulative**), inasmuch as it is no longer what it was when Odysseus went away, but has become soiled and begrimed with soot. Add to this more particularly that you are afraid Jove may set them on to quarrel over their wine, and that they may do each other some harm which may disgrace both banquet and wooing, for the sight of

arms sometimes tempts people to use them. But leave a sword and a spear apiece for yourself and me, and a couple ox hide shields so that we can snatch them up at any moment; Jove and Minerva will then soon quiet these people. There is also another matter; if you are indeed my son and my blood runs in your veins, let no one know that Odysseus is within the house- neither Laertes, nor yet the swineherd, nor any of the servants, nor even Penelope herself. Let you and me exploit the women alone, and let us also make trial of some other of the men servants, to see who is on our side and whose hand is against us (**mistrustful**)."

Odysseus puts his plan into action, and, unrecognized, in the disguise of a poor beggar, he visits his own wife.

From The Odyssey Book XIX

... "Stranger, I shall first ask you who and whence are you? Tell me of your town and parents."

"Madam," answered Odysseus, "who on the face of the whole earth can dare to chide with you? Your fame reaches the firmament of heaven itself; you are like some blameless king, who upholds righteousness, as the monarch over a great and valiant nation: ...

Then Penelope answered, "Stranger, heaven robbed me of all beauty, whether of face or figure, when the Argives set sail for Troy and my dear husband with them. If he were to return and look after my affairs I should be both more respected and should show a better presence to the world. As it is, I am oppressed with care, and with the afflictions which heaven has seen fit to heap upon me. The chiefs from all our islands- Dulichium, Same, and Zacynthus, as also from Ithaca itself, are wooing me against my will and are wasting my estate. I can therefore show no attention to strangers, nor suppliants, nor to people who say that they are skilled artisans, but am all the time brokenhearted about Odysseus. They want me to marry again at once, and I have to invent stratagems in order to deceive them. In the first place heaven put it in my mind to set up a great tambour-frame in my room, and to begin working upon an enormous piece of fine needlework. Then I said to them, 'Sweethearts, Odysseus is indeed dead, still, do not press me to marry again immediately; wait- for I would not have my skill in needlework perish unrecorded- till I have finished making a pall for the hero Laertes, to be ready against the time when death shall take him. He is very rich, and the women of the place will talk if he is laid out without a pall.' This was what I said, and they assented; whereon I used to keep working at my great web

all day long, but at night I would unpick the stitches again by torch light. I fooled them in this way for three years without their finding it out, but as time wore on and I was now in my fourth year, in the waning of moons, and many days had been accomplished, those good-for-nothing hussies my maids betrayed me to the suitors, who broke in upon me and caught me; they were very angry with me, so I was forced to finish my work whether I would or no. ... Still, notwithstanding all this, tell me who you are and where you come from- for you must have had father and mother of some sort; you cannot be the son of an oak or of a rock."

Then Odysseus answered, "madam, wife of Odysseus, since you persist in asking me about my family, I will answer, no matter what it costs me: people must expect to be pained when they

have been exiles as long as I have, and suffered as much among as many peoples. Nevertheless, as regards your question I will tell you all you ask. There is a fair and fruitful island in mid-ocean called Crete; it is thickly peopled and there are nine cities in it: the people speak many different languages which overlap one another, for there are Achaeans, brave Eteocretans, Dorians of three-fold race, and noble Pelasgi. There is a great town there, Cnossus, where Minos reigned who every nine years had a conference with Jove himself. Minos was father to Deucalion, whose son I am (**strategic liar**), for Deucalion had two sons Idomeneus and myself. Idomeneus sailed for Troy, and I, who am the younger, am called Aethon; my brother, however, was at once the older and the more valiant of the two; hence it was in Crete that I saw Odysseus and showed him hospitality, for the winds took him there as he was on his way to Troy, "

Many a plausible tale did Odysseus further tell her, and Penelope wept as she listened, for her heart was melted. As the snow wastes upon the mountain tops when the winds from South East and West have breathed upon it and thawed it till the rivers run bank full with water, even so did her cheeks overflow with tears for the husband who was all the time sitting by her side. Odysseus felt for her and was for her, but he kept his eyes as hard as or iron without letting them so much as quiver, so cunningly did he restrain his tears. Then, when she had relieved herself by weeping, she turned to him again and said: "Now, stranger, I shall put you to the test and see whether or no you really did entertain my husband and his men, as you say you did. Tell me, then, how he was dressed, what kind of a man he was to look at, and so also with his companions."

"Madam," answered Odysseus, "it is such a long time ago that I can hardly say. Twenty years are come and gone since he left my home, and went else whither; but I will tell you as well as I can recollect. Odysseus wore a mantle of purple wool, double lined, and it was fastened by a gold brooch with two catches for the pin. On the face of this there was a device that showed a dog holding a spotted fawn between his fore paws, and watching it as it lay panting upon the ground. Every one marveled at the way in which these things had been done in gold, the dog looking at the fawn, and strangling it, while the fawn was struggling convulsively to escape. As for the shirt that he wore next his skin, it was so soft that it fitted him like the skin of an onion, and glistened in the sunlight to the admiration of all the women who beheld it. Furthermore I say, and lay my saying to your heart, that I do not know whether Odysseus wore these clothes when he left home, or whether one of his companions had given them to him while he was on his voyage; or possibly some one at whose house he was staying made him a present of them, for he was a man of many friends and had few equals among the Achaeans. I myself gave him a sword of bronze and a beautiful purple mantle, double lined, with a shirt that went down to his feet, and I sent him on board his ship with every mark of honor... (**elaborate liar and artful trickster**)"

Penelope was moved still more deeply as she heard the indisputable proofs that Odysseus laid before her; and when she had again found relief in tears she said to him, "Stranger, I was already disposed to pity you, but henceforth you shall be honored and made welcome in my house. It was I who gave Odysseus the clothes you speak of. I took them out of the store room and folded them up myself, and I gave him also the gold brooch to wear as an ornament. Alas! I shall never welcome him home again. It was by an ill fate that he ever set out for that detested city whose very name I cannot bring myself even to mention."

Then Odysseus answered, "Madam, wife of Odysseus, do not disfigure yourself further by grieving thus bitterly for your loss, though I can hardly blame you for doing so. A woman, who has loved her husband and borne him children, would naturally be grieved at losing him, even though he were a worse man than Odysseus, who they say was like a god (**boastful and conceited**). Still, cease your tears and listen to what I can tell I will hide nothing from you, and can say with perfect truth that I have lately heard of Odysseus as being alive and on his way home (**some sense of empathy**);"

Compare and contrast Odysseus with Theseus. In what ethical ways are they fundamentally the same? In what significant way are they very different? How are Penelope and Odysseus very similar?

Odysseus retains the same sense of reciprocal black and white justice and strong sense of group loyalty. He differs strongly in his behavior. Lying, cheating and dissimulation are accepted means to an end and his heroic image is not diminished even by disguising himself as a beggar and enduring humiliation or by the elaborate and hurtful lies he needlessly tells his wife. The Golden Age Greek hero is much more cerebral and emphasizes trickery, manipulation and even deceit when it leads to victory. Penelope displays many of these same traits in her dealings with the suitors.
