A familiar story to anyone who had studied philosophy in the ancient world is Prodicus’ Choice of Heracles. Prodicus was a so-called ‘sophist’ or professional intellectual of the fifth century BC. We have the story from a later writer, Xenophon, who recounted conversations of the philosopher Socrates.

Socrates is talking to a friend, Aristippus, who believes in going for what you want when you want it and not deferring your gratifications. Socrates objects that as a policy this may be dangerous; if you are unable to control your desires you may end up at the mercy of people who can, and who use their superior self-mastery to compete with you successfully and to gain control over your life. Aristippus doubts this. He can, he says, lead a life which is devoted to self-gratification and yet manage to avoid being dominated by others; and this is the way to happiness.

Socrates disagrees. It isn’t, he thinks, just a matter of evading what others can do to you. It’s a matter of how you regard your own life. To make the point he tells Prodicus’ story of how the demi-god Heracles, at the start of adult life, came to a crossroads. Two women came along, each urging him to take one of the opposing ways. One was self-consciously fashionable,
The sophists

‘Sophists’ is the term used for a number of intellectuals in the fifth century BC who, while they did not form a unified intellectual tradition, represented a new departure. They travelled around various cities, teaching for money a variety of intellectual skills, the most saleable being skills in rhetoric and argument which would give the learner an advantage in public life. Although only some of their concerns fit into the philosophical tradition, they have remained on its edge because Plato immortalized them in many of his dialogues as pompous incompetent fools, a foil to his own hero Socrates. Plato’s depiction is gleefully unfair, but we lack enough independent evidence to counter it in any detail.

The most famous sophists were Hippias of Elis, Prodicus of Cos, Thrasymachus of Chalcedon and Protagoras of Abdera. Hippias was famous for the large number of his accomplishments and Prodicus for his study of language. Thrasymachus is portrayed in the Republic as holding an account of justice which aggressively reduces it to the interest of the stronger. Protagoras is the only one who held an important philosophical thesis, namely relativism, the view that for a belief to be true is just for it to appear true to the person who holds it. Plato refutes this view in his dialogue Theaetetus (see p. 72 below).

Plato despises the sophists for many reasons. He rejects their views, particularly relativism, and he thinks that teaching intellectual skills for money debases these by turning them into commodities, valued for what they do for you rather than respected for their own sake. He also thinks that, just because they do not take it seriously, the sophists are in fact incompetent at philosophical argument. In his presentation of them, of course, they certainly are.
bold and made-up; she ran ahead of him and urged him to take the easy road of satisfying desires and going through life doing what he wanted, deliberating only as to how to do so with least effort. My friends, she said, call me Happiness, though my enemies call me Vice (or Pleasure). The other woman, solemn and modest in manner, appealed by her words rather than her appearance, and urged him to follow her, Virtue, even though her way was one of effort and frequent frustration rather than easy success. What I offer, she said, is worth while but requires work and self-denial; vice and pleasure offer an easy road to happiness, but the initial appeal fades and leaves you with nothing worth having, whereas virtue is the way to achievement and respect, which forms real happiness.

The Choice of Heracles forms a frequent subject in western art. The version illustrated here, by Paolo de Matteis, was commissioned in 1712 by the philosopher Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, to provide an illustration for his own book on virtue. It and many similar depictions reinforce something that makes a modern reader uncomfortable: moral choice is depicted as two females competing for a man. Moreover, even though one point is that what matters is reality, not appearance, this point is itself expressed in terms of one female being, on due consideration, more attractive than the other.

But apart from this, we may feel puzzled as to why this story, which seems to us over-obvious, should be famous. Clearly, we may think, if you are asked to choose between virtue and vice, you should choose virtue, but that’s the easy part; the hard part is working out what virtue is, and depicting it as a modest maiden rather than a shameless floozy not only is a sexist way of presenting it, but doesn’t help us much. If we think this, it is probably because much twentieth-century ethical thinking has made the ancient ethical framework unfamiliar. But this is a comparatively recent development, and one now rapidly being reversed, as virtue becomes more familiar in both philosophical and political discourse. We are now, it turns out, in quite a good position to appreciate the claims of Virtue on Heracles.
4. Heracles deciding between austere Virtue and tempting Pleasure
Virtue and Vice are offering Heracles differing roads to happiness. Prodicus was one of the first philosophers to make explicit something important; we are all, in our lives, aiming at happiness. We find the thought also in the slightly later philosophers Democritus and Plato; the latter stresses that it would be ludicrous to deny that happiness is our overall goal in life, the destination on everyone’s road.

But Prodicus also made a mark by emphasizing something else. When you are starting out on adult life, aiming at happiness, and doing so consciously, you will be faced with a choice. You can’t have it all; you can’t go through life gratifying your desires and still hope to achieve anything worthwhile or to live a life that you or others can respect. Recognizing explicitly that your aim in life is happiness brings with it the realization that you have to reflect on and order your life in one way rather than another. Life presents you with the alternatives; you have to make the decisions. Centuries later Cicero, aware of much sophisticated discussion, still thought that the story said something profound about everybody’s life and their attitude to it.

Happiness and Pleasure

In the different tellings of the story the shameless floozy is indifferently Vice or Pleasure. In our traditions of moral philosophy it may seem strange that pleasure is the bad, rejected way of getting happiness. John Stuart Mill, a major founder of the Utilitarian tradition, actually defined happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain, but even if we do not see happiness as actually constituted by pleasure it still seems somewhat odd to see happiness as achieved by virtue as opposed to pleasure. Here we can see that ancient ethical thought gives a different conceptual role to happiness.

Happiness in ancient ethical thought is not a matter of feeling good or being pleased; it is not a feeling or emotion at all. It is your life as a whole which is said to be happy or not, and so discussions of happiness are
discussions of the happy life. It is our bad luck that for us what is happy are not just lives, but also moments and fleeting experiences; modern discussions of happiness tend to get confused very rapidly because such different things are being considered. In ancient ethics happiness enters ethical discussion by a very different route from the ‘feel-good’ one.

Sometimes you step back from your routines of daily life and think about your life as a whole. You may be forced to do this by a crisis, or it might be that passing a stage in your life, such as becoming an adult rather than an adolescent – as in the Heracles story – makes you think about what you are doing in your life overall, what your values are and what matters most to you. For the ancients this is the beginning of ethical thinking, the entry-point for ethical reflection. Once you become self-aware, you have to face choices, and deal with the fact that certain values, and courses of action, exclude others. You have to ask how all your concerns fit together, or fail to fit. What you are looking for, all ancient thinkers assume, is how to make sense of your life as a whole, by bringing your concerns under the heading of your final aim or goal, your telos. For someone who fails to unify her concerns in any overall way is radically in denial about the way all her projects are hers, fit together in her life.

What can you say about the way your life is tending, the values you are expressing in your life? At first, probably not much. It is only after thinking through some ethical theories that you will have much of an explicit idea as to what values are unifying your life. But there is one thing that you can say, even before venturing on to theory: as philosophers from Prodicus on agree, and as is most famously set forth by Aristotle, everyone agrees that their final end is happiness, and that what people seek in everything they do is to live a happy life. (Hence ancient ethical theories are called eudaimonist, from eudaimonia, the Greek for happiness.)

Why is this supposed to be so obvious? It would not be obvious at all if happiness were introduced via the notion of pleasure or feeling good. But happiness answers to formal properties that our final end has. That is, the
happy life has to meet certain demands before we can even start asking what its content is; any candidate for being the content – virtue, pleasure or whatever – has to meet these demands. The overall end which unifies all your concerns has to be complete: everything you do or go for is sought for the sake of it, while it is not sought for the sake of anything further. It also has to be self-sufficient: it does not leave out any element in your life that has value as part of living well. These are common-sense points, though they have powerful implications. And on the level of common sense or intuition, happiness is the only aim, plausible as an aim in your life as a whole, which is complete and self-sufficient. We do other things in order to be happy, but it makes no sense to be happy for some further reason. And once we are living happily we lack nothing further to be living well. These points are obvious with the ancient conception of happiness. But, as Aristotle immediately points out, they do not settle very much, for great disagreement remains as to how happiness should be specified, and the different schools of thought about ethics take off from here.

One point is clear right from the start, however. Happiness is having a happy life – it applies to your life overall. Pleasure, however, is more naturally taken to be something episodic, something you can feel now and not later. It is something you experience as we perform the activities which make up your life. You can be enjoying a meal, a conversation, even life one moment and not the next; but you cannot, in the ancient way of thinking, be happy one moment and not the next, since happiness applies to your life as a whole.

Hence we can see why Pleasure’s role in Prodicus’ story is to provide an obviously faulty road to happiness. Pleasure fixes us on the here and now, the present desire which asks to be satisfied; and this gets in the way of the self-control and rational overall reflection which is required by a life devoted to things that are worth while. Pleasure is short-term, while happiness is long-term. So, in complete opposition to the modern way of looking at the matter, it looks as though pleasure is not even in the running.
to be a candidate for happiness. How could your life as a whole be focused on a short-term reward like pleasure? Someone who does this is making a big mistake, giving in to the present satisfaction at the cost of a proper concern for the rest of his life.

In fact hedonism, the view that pleasure is our ethical end, is always on the defensive in ancient ethics. Opponents like to make it appear as though this is because there is something inherently unworthy about humans going for pleasure, but this is edifying rhetoric. The problem is rather that pleasure is defective as an aim that could structure a person’s entire life. We can see this in the two major hedonist theories.

Aristippus founded a school called Cyrenaics after their home at Cyrene in North Africa. It was not a very unified school, but they all held that our final end – namely what we seek in everything we do – is pleasure, and by pleasure they uncompromisingly meant what we experience when we enjoy or feel good about some experience. Pleasure is a movement, not a settled state (and so is pain). Pleasures do not differ from one another, and one pleasure is not more pleasant than another; that is, pleasure is taken to be a single kind of experience which is always the same whatever the circumstances which produce it. We have access to pleasure only by our direct experience of it, and we have knowledge only of our experiences, not of the objects which produce them. Hence past pleasures, which have vanished, and future pleasures, which are still to come, cannot be compared with the present pleasure which we experience, and the Cyrenaics sometimes speak as though only the present exists; certainly the present is all that matters, and our lives should be so shaped as to get present pleasure.

If all that matters is to get present pleasure, what has happened to happiness? Alone among ancient philosophers, some of the Cyrenaics say that we should not be concerned about it. A happy life is an organized one in which past and future pleasures count in relation to present ones, but if our concern should always be to pursue the present
Kinds of hedonism

Aristippus of Cyrene in North Africa (c.435–355 BC) went to Athens and was an associate of Socrates. Evidence about his life is unreliable, consisting mainly of anecdotes showing him living a colourful life devoted to gratification, with no care for his dignity or for other people. However, he cared enough about his daughter, Arete, to teach her his ideas, and she passed them on to her son, Aristippus the Younger, who may be the source of the systematic philosophy attributed to the school of Cyrene.

Epicurus of Athens (341–270 BC) developed his own version of hedonism in a way that he represented as self-taught, although he did have some philosophical education. Around 307 he set up a philosophical school in Athens. Unlike the schools of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics, it was not one which met in a public place and in which teaching prominently included argument and debate. Epicurus’ school was called the Garden after its home, and his teaching put a premium on learning and memorizing the words of Epicurus and other founding members. Discussion took place orally and in writing throughout the school’s history, but Epicureans regarded Epicurus as a saviour from unhappiness and a shining light in a way that philosophers from other schools found too deferential. Epicurus’ main contribution was his hedonistic ethics; in his philosophy of nature he took over the views of the earlier Atomist Democritus, developing a world-view in which, unusually in ancient philosophy, there is no room for providence or teleology of any kind, and the gods, though they exist, take no interest in the world or in human beings.
pleasure then happiness will often get in the way of this, and we should disregard it.

This might sound like a suicidal strategy for living your life, one that is bound to favour short-term production of intense present pleasure from, for example, sex and drugs, with no thought for your future. In fact the Cyrenaics do not have to hold this; they only have to hold that reflection on and concern for your life as a whole has value only insofar as it tends to produce present pleasure. This means that overall reflection about your life can have value only instrumentally, as a means to something else. This thought seems to have been found deeply unpersuasive; at any rate the Cyrenaics were never more than an eccentric school in ancient ethical thought.

Epicurus seems to have learned from their failure, and he makes an effort to present pleasure as a candidate for happiness that meets the overall demands, thus making his theory more acceptable and mainstream. Your concern with your whole life, he thinks, is not just a means to enjoyment of the present; rather, it matters to you in its own right, as people commonly think. However, the happy life is, in fact, a life of pleasure.

We can see from the moves already made that this is going to sound strange: how can focusing on short-term gratifications also be a long-term concern with what matters overall in your life? Epicurus has to deny that pleasure is always short-term enjoyment. There are two kinds of pleasure, he insists, and while one of them is the kind of enjoyment that people get from activities such as eating, drinking, sex and the like, and is a ‘movement’, there is also another, ‘static’ kind, and this is what we should be seeking as the right way of achieving the happy life. Static pleasure is the absence of bodily pain and mental trouble; it is the state where you are functioning without impediment or discomfort. Epicurus boldly claims that this state is the highest pleasure that we can achieve – that is, you achieve happiness not by doing things that make you feel good, but by so ordering your life that you achieve this condition of
painlessness and tranquillity. Unsurprisingly, doing this involves ‘sober reasoning’, which scrutinizes your life carefully and rejects activities which will result overall in impingements on your tranquillity. Hence short-term gratification and success is rejected if the results will lead to a less balanced and undisturbed plan of life overall. The Epicurean happy life, then, far from being a wild pursuit of fun experience, turns out to be a cautious and risk-aversive strategy for maintaining tranquillity. Critics did not tire of pointing out that, even if this is an acceptable idea of living happily, it is a peculiar conception of the most pleasant way we could live.

We can see why, given the ancient framework for ethics, hedonism is at a disadvantage. Hedonists seem condemned to giving an implausible account either of happiness, as with Aristippus, or of pleasure, as with Epicurus.

Our modern conception of happiness is frequently understood in terms of pleasure and desire-satisfaction (something aided by the wide and confused way we use ‘happy’), and this can make it hard at first to see the appeal of ancient theories of happiness. If happiness is just getting what you want, then the ideas in the Choice of Heracles make no sense. However, our ideas about happiness derive from many sources and also contain elements more congenial to eudaimonism. We think of a happy life as involving achievement and success, for example, rather than just getting what you want. Theories of happiness as desire-satisfaction systematically run into problems once we face them with thoughts about our life as a whole.

Happiness and Virtue

Until recently, though, the really alien idea in the Choice of Heracles would have been thought to be the role of Virtue. In modern ethical thought, until quite recently, virtue had become something of a joke concept, one that could be understood only historically and could not be seriously used in ethical thinking. In the last decade, however, ‘virtue ethics’ has had a
spectacular comeback. Once again, however, we find that there is not a perfect match between our notion of virtue and the ancient one, and so some explanation and comparison is needed.

A minimal conception of ancient virtue is that of having a systematic concern to do the morally right thing. All that this assumes is that we have some grip on the idea of doing what is morally right, as opposed to what is wrong. We do not have to start with an elaborate theory as to what is morally right; our account of this is deepened as the account of virtue develops.

Virtue is a richer notion than this, but already it is distinguished from non-moral concerns – the idea, for example, that virtue is a sort of non-moral ‘excellence’. (Unfortunately, a misguided attempt to ‘modernize’ ancient ethical texts has led some translators to render the Greek word arete by ‘excellence’ rather than the supposedly old-fashioned ‘virtue’, thus obscuring the point that the texts are about morality. This is especially unfortunate now that modern moral philosophers are recognizing the moral import of virtue.)

Someone wanting to be prepared to do the morally right thing, not just occasionally but systematically, will have to have developed self-mastery and strength of mind to overcome the (very many) incentives we have to do something else. Hence it is not surprising that Virtue tells Heracles that her way is difficult and often unpleasant and frustrating. It is fine to do the morally right thing, but the virtuous person has to do a lot more than that. She has to develop a disposition, a firm state, of doing the morally right thing. And to get to that point she has to have developed two things, a firm understanding of morality and the willingness to act on it. Neither is easy or rapidly developed, and by the time someone is virtuous he will have made himself be a certain kind of person. Hence there is a connexion between virtue and your life as a whole: becoming virtuous is becoming a person with a certain kind of character, and this requires reflecting in a thoughtful way about your life as a whole and the kind of person you
aspire to be, as well as having the motivation to follow through on this. Neither is going to happen if you simply go along satisfying your desires and never developing the ability to think and act in the long term.

The modern conception of virtue is in many ways weaker than this. A virtue is often thought of as a kind of habit of acting in a certain way; this makes the virtues look like separate habits which grow up in locally isolated ways, since it certainly seems that you can develop a habit of generous giving without having a habit of acting bravely. In the ancient way of looking at it, isolated habits of action have to be unified by your understanding of what is morally appropriate, since it could hardly be the case that morality made one set of requirements for generosity and another, quite unrelated set for courage. In ancient ethics the point is not to have localized virtues but to be virtuous, to have the unified understanding which grounds all the virtues and is called practical wisdom or *phronesis*.

The ancient conception of virtue, moreover, is one in which practical wisdom takes the form of practical reasoning which is integrated with the motivation to do it. We have seen in Chapter 1 that there are many ancient theories as to the relation of reason and emotion; but all agree that in the virtuous person emotion and feeling are not, or are no longer, fighting against reason. The person who understands what the moral action requires, but has to battle down contrary motivation in order to do it, is not yet virtuous, but only self-controlled. Virtue requires that the person’s motivation go along with her understanding.

Virtue, then, is a pretty demanding idea, in the ancient way of looking at it. It’s not hard to see why critics of Epicurus’ hedonism charged that he could not account for virtue. If pleasure is what we should be going for as our overall aim, then it is hard to see why we should care about the claims of morality except as means to gaining pleasure or avoiding pain. Epicurus denies that he is committed to this, but his critics seem to have the better of him here.
Can you be happy on the rack?

Most pressing, in ancient ethical debates, is the issue of the place of virtue in happiness. Virtue is the right pathway to the happy life, but this leaves many options open. Happiness is our overall aim, the goal for whose sake we do and seek everything else, while we don’t seek to be happy for any further reason. Being a virtuous person will matter for this, but surely, we may think, common sense requires that other things matter too – for example, having a reasonable amount of money and other necessities, achieving success and so on. How could a happy life be a completely poverty-stricken and unsuccessful one?

Aristotle, who among ancient philosophers sticks most closely to common sense, agrees that this reaction of ours is an important one. Happiness, he holds, does require some amount of ‘external goods’ like money and success. On their own, no amount of such goods could make you happy, since whether or not you have them is not primarily up to you, and he thinks that, once you have begun to reflect ethically on your life, happiness must come from your own reflection on and organization of your life, and cannot just lie in external goods that circumstances can give and take away. Aristotle, however, fights shy of the idea that you can make yourself happy by making yourself virtuous. If that were so, he says, then a virtuous person would be happy even if he met with great and undeserved misfortunes, such as being tortured on the rack – and that would be hopelessly absurd.

Aristotle’s conclusion tends to sound reasonable to us, since we have almost certainly never thought that being a virtuous or moral person is sufficient for having a happy life; so we can miss the point that in terms of the ancient theories it is a very unsatisfactory position to be in. He has to hold that the kind of person you are matters for having a happy life more than having money, status and so on, which matter only a certain amount; but he cannot say just how much they matter, since he is unwilling to say that a person who loses just that amount of money, status or whatever, is
bound to be unhappy. Often he stresses that what is significant for living a happy life is not the goods you have but the use you make of them; just as the shoemaker does the best he can with whatever leather he has, and people who have suffered misfortunes do the best they can with what circumstances allow them. Hence he is unwilling to allow that a virtuous person who at the end of his life falls into great misfortune (such as Priam, the good king of Troy who lives to see his sons killed and city destroyed) must be considered to have lost their happiness. On the other hand, he wants to skirt what he sees as the ridiculous conclusion that the virtuous person is, just by being virtuous, happy whatever bad things happen to him. Hence he can allow neither that Priam after the fall of Troy is happy, nor that he is unhappy; he is torn between the common-sense view that of course he isn’t happy, and the more theoretical idea that he has not lost his happiness, since happiness has to come from what you have made of your life, not from what other people do to you. So Aristotle’s position is not really coherent – an irony, since he is the ancient philosopher most popular with and appealed to by modern authors developing theories of ‘virtue ethics’.

Plato and the Stoics, more willing than Aristotle to discount ordinary views, defend the view that being virtuous is sufficient for a happy life. We can see that this is not, in the framework of ancient ethical thinking, the disastrously high-minded but implausible claim that it would seem if brought out without preface nowadays, but it may still seem unrealistic.

They think, however, that Aristotle makes a mistake in allowing that external evils subtract from the contribution to happiness that virtue makes. In fact, they think, virtue has a quite different kind of value. The Stoics put this point dramatically by saying that virtue is the only thing that is good, whereas health, money and so on should be called ‘indifferent’, although if we naturally go for something, such as health, it is a ‘preferred indifferent’. They were not afraid to make themselves sound somewhat ridiculous by inventing new terminology disallowing straightforward computation that includes both virtue and external goods. In this
respect they anticipate some of Kant’s ideas about moral and non-moral value.

But is it just high-minded assertion that virtue is what matters most? Among the ways this is defended is the view, widespread in ancient ethics, that virtue is a kind of understanding of moral value (an understanding which, as we have seen, includes and is not opposed to affect and positive motivation), one that can be seen as an expertise or skill, exercised on the materials provided by the circumstances of your life. Just as a product or a work of art can be produced skilfully even with limited or inferior materials (something clearest in the performing arts) so a life can be well, and so happily lived even though the circumstances the person had to work on were inferior or positively bad. Aristotle comes near this idea when he compares the person in misfortune to the shoemaker doing the best he can with inferior leather; but he is too impressed by the idea that the product will be inferior to appreciate the point that the exercise of skill, the actual performance of the expert, may well be as impressive (or more so) in reduced circumstances as in good ones. The idea that virtue is a skill and that external advantages are its material makes prominent the idea that you make your own life; whatever you have to work with, the moral quality of your life comes from the way you live it, the choices you make and their implications for your character.

This idea is strikingly egalitarian, and accounts for the Stoic position that happiness is attainable not just by those well-provided by life with money, good looks and status, but also by those who have bad luck: slaves, the conquered, people in limited social positions, like most women in the ancient world. It is notable that two of our major Stoic texts from the period of the Roman empire come from Marcus Aurelius, an Emperor, and from Epictetus, a freed slave. Stoicism was available equally to both of them as a philosophy to live by.

But if external goods do not contribute to our happiness, why should we even bother with them? The Stoic position here is subtle and hard to
express briefly, but important here is the idea that we should make moral decisions from where we are. When you start to think about virtue, you are not a blank slate; you already have a given nature with needs for food, security, and so on, and also a social position: you already have a family, a nation, a job, and so on. It would be absurd, flouting human nature, to try to sacrifice or ignore these facts in the name of virtue; rather, we should aim to deal virtuously with them, always remembering that the demands of virtue trump them. Again, there are many affinities with Kant’s moral thinking.

Can you be happy on the rack?

‘[T]he happy man needs the goods of the body and external goods, i.e. those of fortune . . . in order that he may not be impeded . . . Those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense.’

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VII, Chapter 13

‘Aristotle’s works on this, the *Nicomachean Ethics* and others, have ideas about virtue which are petty and grovelling and vulgar . . . they dare to grab from virtue the diadem and royal sceptre which she holds inalienably from Zeus. They do not permit her to make us happy, but put her on a level with money, status, noble birth, health, beauty and other things which are common to virtue and vice. Just as any of these without virtue is not sufficient to render its possessor happy, so virtue without these, they say, is in the same way insufficient to make its possessor happy. How, then, is the value of virtue not destroyed and overthrown?’

Atticus, second century AD Platonist

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Atticus, second century AD Platonist
Virtue, ancient and modern

‘Virtue ethics’ has recently moved to the foreground of contemporary moral thinking, and with it an engagement with ancient ethical theories (unfortunately with a disproportionate emphasis on Aristotle). A common worry, which threatens to isolate the ancients from us, is that the development of a virtue is the development of a habit of doing the morally right thing – but what that is, is given by what virtuous people in your society do. Virtues develop within cultures and traditions; noticing this obvious enough point sometimes produces the charge that eudaimonist ethics is essentially conservative. Aristotle delineates the virtues recognized in his society; but these are the virtues of a privileged élite – free adult Greek males – and have dubious moral relevance beyond that, or to potential social improvements.

This common charge misses the point. Of course we begin by emulating the people we recognize as virtuous in our society; hence, unsurprisingly, virtues differ between cultures. But this is all prior to the beginning of ethical thought; ancient ethics begins at the point when the individual starts to reflect about her life as a whole, and make decisions which recognize the necessity of choosing between options, as Heracles does. The ancient ethical agent takes charge of his life; as practical reasoning develops he becomes ever more in control of it, and ever more responsible for the quality of it. Of course the result is different now from what it was in ancient Greece. How could it not be? The options are different. What is the same is the difference that is made when the agent stops drifting along in her life and taking for granted the social pressures on it, and starts to think ethically about it and the form it takes.

Ancient ethical thought is attractive because, among other things, it unites two concerns which are hard to find together in other traditions. One is a sense of the demands of morality, the recognition that morality makes a huge difference to all of your life. The other is a rootedness in concerns that we all have, and have difficulty making ethical sense of – family, jobs,
commitments, friends, and the business of everyday living. The person who follows philosophy to the point of holding that virtue is sufficient for happiness has travelled a long way from her original concerns, and yet has never abandoned them.