
Students of Greek political thought will want to read Irwin's book. Its historical range is impressive, stretching from Homer to Augustine. Further, and as the very title of the volume, Classical Thought, makes plain, its scope is wide, inclusive of epic poets, historians, tragedians, and medical writers as well as the philosophers themselves.

The first part of the story which Irwin tells which will be of primary interest to readers of Polis is a familiar one, drawn ultimately from the work of the social anthropologists and presented to the English-speaking audience of classicists by Dodds and Adkins. Heroic virtue, dependent in large measure upon such 'natural' goods outside the agent's control as birth and physical appearance, manifests itself in a life devoted to the acquisition of personal honor, time. And such a life breeds, indeed exemplifies, a self-regarding, almost narcissistic, attitude. But this aspect of the heroic outlook has untoward political consequences, namely the undermining of those very minimal structures upon which the society is held to depend. "Homeric ethics," says Irwin, "gives each person an interest in supporting a system whose effects harm everyone." (18) Irwin's point, then, is that Homeric ethics is, at root, self-destructive.

Reflection upon the (conflict-producing) nature of the Homerite conception of the human good and the equally conflictual divine world which it mirrors leads directly to the desire of those 6th and 5th century cosmologists (Anaximander, Xenophanes and Heraclitus), politicians (Solon and Cleisthenes), historians (esp.
Herodotus) and medical writers to find in nature and society the rule of (impersonal) law. This 'determinist' move to overcome the 'freedom,' spontaneity and lack of social sensibility of the (aristocratic) Homeric hero has its culmination in (a) the development of the great democratic reforms in Athens in the 6th century, which "make it harder to exploit the traditional loyalties supporting the aristocratic factions." (37) (b) the ruminations of the father of history, who "implies that historical events and changes are not all explained by reference to individual desires, whims, or quarrels, or by sudden and unpredictable interferences by the gods, or by unaccountable chances," (27) and (c) the early medical writers who claim "that everything is determined by causes conforming to general laws." (29) For Irwin, the disorderly, 'unscientific' Homeric world, populated by self-regarding and self-seeking individuals, gives way to a world under the rule of law, populated now by individuals acting with a (nascent) sense of history and a communal sensibility based upon legal foundations. No longer is it each man for himself (at least explicitly.) Perhaps no better instance of this transition can be found than the great Oresteia of Aeschylus where the justice of Zeus is replaced by the 'enlightened' justice of Apollo.

But this pleasing picture is hardly the end of the story. The (self-seeking) individual is not so easily supplanted. The Furies are not so easily placated. Doubts about the knowability of an objective natural order creep in. The Democritean distinction between appearance and reality, and between nature and convention (ultimately a legacy from Parmenides) forces a reconsideration of the earlier (epistemic) optimism. Perhaps the laws and conventions according to which society functions are but a thin veneer covering the true nature of man. Perhaps society does not mirror nature, or if it does, then nature is not so benign as we might like