The Choice of Hercules

Pleasure, Duty and the Good Life in the 21st Century

A. C. Grayling

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON
A curiosity attaches to the use of the myth of Hercules’ youthful choice between Duty and Pleasure, or Virtue and Vice – the terms were taken to be interchangeable, though in the myth’s most famous first telling it was the second pair that figured. The curiosity is that Hercules was scarcely an example of the choice he is said to have made, namely, Duty or Virtue. His legends together represent him as a brawling hooligan, a multiple murderer, an anarchy of brawn and appetite conjoined – far from the thoughtful individual, chin in hand, listening attentively to the arguments and blandishments of the two charming advocates who present their cases to him.

Indeed, the reason that Hercules is working as a cowherd in a rural fastness at the time Duty and Pleasure find him is that he has murdered his music tutor, the hapless Linus, and his earthly stepfather has banished him to pastoral duties as a penitence. While herding cows Hercules was entertained by Thespius, father of fifty daughters, all of whom Hercules proceeded to sleep with – in some versions, all of them in a single night; in others, one per night. In this latter version the girls were supplied to Hercules’ couch by Thespius himself, because the old man could recognise sterling genes
The Choice of Hercules

when he saw them. Hercules was, after all, the natural son of Zeus himself, the outcome of one of the god’s many dalliances with mortal women, in this case Alcmene. (The Christian story is another retelling of this ancient myth about gods, mortal maids, and resulting heroes. It is a trope that far pre-dates Zeus.)

The classic version of the tale of Hercules’ choice appears in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon. Xenophon was a friend and pupil of Socrates as well as a distinguished writer and military man in his own right. In his *Memorabilia* he has Socrates recount the anecdote as if it had been told him by someone else – as it happens, by Prodicus, Socrates’ teacher. It goes as follows. As Hercules sat watching his herd, a tall, slender woman in a simple white robe approached him from one side, while from the other came a curvaceous young woman in make-up and plunging décolletage. The latter offered Hercules sex, entertainment, and lifelong ease; the former offered him struggle and labour, rewarded by immortal fame. Socrates does not explicitly say which way Hercules decided, but of course we gather that he chose undying fame and all that led to it as the only right and possible course for a deity’s son with a high destiny.

The story is too good ever to have been neglected in subsequent moral and even political symbolisations. It was applied to different heroes; Scipio had a dream very like it, which inspired Rome, and it was incorporated into Christian teaching (one reworking of it has Christ in the wilderness for forty days, but with only one would-be seducer). Poussin, Veronese, Paolo de Matteis and Rubens painted it; Handel and Bach put it to music; the revolutionary fathers of the United States wanted to represent it on their coinage; and the French revolutionaries proposed to build a giant statue of virtue-choosing Hercules in central Paris as an emblem of their new order.
One aspect of the power of the story is that with his muscles and half-divine birth, Hercules could have lived mightily whichever of the options he chose; so by opting for duty and virtue, by seeking deathless fame rather than decadent gratification and ease, this prodigious figure bent his strength to the direction of good – a super role model (a role supermodel?) especially for restless, randy, aggressive, testosterone-soaked young adult males in all the phases of history in which the myth was used as a morality tale.

It is entertaining to see how the Enlightenment handled the story. The libretto for Handel’s oratorio *The Choice of Hercules* (HWV 69, 1761) was drawn from a poem by Robert Lowth and adapted by Handel’s librettist Thomas Morell. The adaptation weakened the moral punch of Lowth’s original by its abridgements and its substitutions of terms, principally ‘pleasure’ in place of Lowth’s ‘sloth’. But in fact it thereby reached back, no doubt inadvertently, to something closer to the original intention of the tale; for in the Greek outlook there would have been little point in pitting an obviously winning argument against one of equally obvious demerit, and in any case pleasure was not regarded by the Greeks with the squeamish horror of Christian moralisers, for whom it was one of the enemies who fling wide the gates to Satan.

In Handel’s oratorio Pleasure offers Hercules a home on ‘yonder myrtle plain’, where streams glide, the smoking feast is being prepared, and her ‘laughing train’ wait to serve him. Perfumes suffuse the cool, shady bower, and its peace is enhanced by ‘sweet warbling lays’ to love and beauty. And nearby waits Beauty herself, aglow for his arms:

Love awakes its purest fire  
And to each ravish’d sense bestows  
All that can raise or sate desire.
The Choice of Hercules

Enthused, the chorus cries, ‘Seize, seize these blessings, blooming boy.’

Virtue will have none of it. ‘Away mistaken wretch, away!’ she sternly says to Pleasure,

spread your snare elsewhere …
This manly youth’s exalted mind
Above thy grovelling taste refin’d
Shall listen to my awful voice.

To Hercules she promises ‘the golden trump of fame’ when he has bared his breast and poured out his ‘generous blood’ for his country.

Virtue does not have it quite all her own way in Handel. Hercules addresses Pleasure as ‘enchanting Siren’, and is half seduced by her delicious blandishments, all the more enticing for promising Love as the reward for choosing her. At one point he says, ‘Oh, whither reason dost thou fly?/Purge the soft charm that fascinates my eye.’ He is struggling. Virtue’s response is to exhort him to ‘Mount, mount the steep ascent’ – here is an allusion to the familiar Christian conceit of the strait and narrow way – ‘and claim thy native skies!’ Hercules at last obeys her, choosing to be ‘a god among the gods’ in return for forfeiting the life of pleasure for a life of trial, forgoing amorousness for arduousness, ease for labour, the present for the future.

Librettist and composer between them give Pleasure some of the best lines and airs; Virtue’s victory is an unpersuasive one in Handel’s rendering, but of course convention unloads its great weight into her side of the scales, and Handel’s contemporaries would have known what they were supposed to believe, even if they did not really believe it, or want to.

But it matters that something better than winding streams and sexual promise should be made out for pleasure’s argu-
ment, because in all but the starved conception of the good life that various pieties seek to impose, pleasure is one of its essentials – pleasure, that is to say, well understood. So we must ask: what is pleasure, when well understood?

What pleases, what affords delight, what satisfies the human need for taste, colour, sensation, stimulation, distraction, thereby adding relish to our hours and making our days happy, is obviously enough a peculiarly mixed bag. The large differences in personal tastes explain why, but so also does the fact that although many people can learn to be satisfied with a narrow and unvarying repertoire of interests, equally many cannot, at least for long, that is a function of the sheer fact of human intelligence.

It follows not merely that there is no single formula for encapsulating what life’s pleasures are, but – more importantly – that there should not be, though philosophers have plunged themselves into trouble by trying to legislate about both. Epicurus, founder of the Epicurean school in the third century BC, taught that the true pleasures are those of intellectual discourse and friendship; that the highest enjoyment is attained by sitting in the shade discussing philosophy, and otherwise living with simplicity and moderation. ‘Epicurean’ has come to denote something quite different, indeed opposite: a life of luxury, drink, feasting – in short, sensual indulgence; and it is this that Handel’s Pleasure invokes. This happened because Epicurus’ outlook was summed up in the adjuration to ‘pursue pleasure and avoid pain’, and coarser sensibilities fail to recognise that what they think pleasurable is precisely what Epicurus regarded as containing the seeds of pain, given that the fruits of sensual excess are indigestion, hangover, obesity, illness, and so dismally on. Epicurus’ other slogan, ‘moderation in all things’, guarded against this. It did, however, include moderation itself; so
the Epicureans occasionally let their hair down and had a party.

‘True pleasure’: the implication of the adjective for John Stuart Mill, more than two thousand years after Epicurus, was much the same. He distinguished between higher and lower pleasures, thereby attracting much criticism from those who do not see how anything but a certain kind of prejudice, however well meaning, can assert the superiority of reading Aeschylus to having a pint of beer in a pub. Mill responded by saying that someone who knew both pleasures was in the right position to judge which was the ‘higher’; but this does not silence his critics, who in sum say that either there is an implicit intellectual snobbery in the view, or that someone who knew both pleasures could nevertheless still prefer beer to Aeschylus – and on what grounds could one reproach him?

It is inevitable that someone who claims to be in a position to recognise the respect in which a Jane Austen novel is superior to a Mills and Boon novel (they both have roughly the same basic plot: boy meets girl, vicissitudes ensue, vicissitudes are resolved, boy marries girl), or the respect in which a Beethoven symphony is superior to a pop song, is going to invite just such a challenge, and rightly so; for one thing, the point is not only about the intrinsic merits of what is being compared in each case, but also about the value to those who encounter them. For some, a pint of beer is more valuable, more interesting, more attractive than a reading of Aeschylus. For some, a Mills and Boon novel is more accessible, more assimilable, and more enjoyable than the intricacies and ironies of Jane Austen and her delicate prose. A Beethoven symphony might be an agony to someone for whom the driving rhythms of a pop song, and its lyrics addressing matters of immediate interest to his or her youthful romances, are manna. Granting all this is to take
a wider view of what pleasure legitimately and necessarily embraces.

For my money the complexity, depth, nuance, power, and insight of Jane Austen, Beethoven and Aeschylus knock the putative competitors into a cocked hat. But that’s for my money; and this is not the point in discussing the role of pleasure in making life good. It would be a hideous distortion of the endeavour to encourage good lives if things that give pleasure were to be denied people on supposed elitist grounds, or in the belief that Mill is right – though he is – about ‘higher pleasures’. So what? The point is not about the altitude of pleasure, but its existence; and that refocuses the question from the supposed nature of the pleasure to what it does. As adding to the good of an individual existence, this is as it should be. If pleasure is actually an Epicurean seed of pain, that raises a question about it that must be discussed, for if we think, as we well might, that this makes a future-pain-promising current pleasure intrinsically undesirable (smoking, binge drinking, unprotected sex), it abuts the question of the individual’s freedom, another of the essentials of the good life (see later). If it harms others, it is definitely illegitimate – for the harm principle, which states that it is never right to do what harms others, except in clearly justified circumstances such as self-defence and the prevention of greater harm, trumps everything. All these points are surely obvious enough.

Pleasure has a twofold possibility: there is mental pleasure, and there is pleasure both mental and physical. Consider the second first. Pleasure as conscious enjoyment of the human sensory endowment – the reflective ability to contemplate, anticipate, remember, and heighten the experience of the senses, in appreciation of music, the taste and effects of food and drink, enjoyment of sex, the pleasure of dancing, swim-
ming, lying in the sun, walking in the country, having a massage, and so variously and multiply on – would doubtless be pleasurable enough in the moment as a purely physical thing (‘animal pleasure’ we sometimes say), but it is obvious that reflexive consciousness of the fact that pleasurable stimulation of some combination of senses is occurring adds greatly to their effect. Think of the opposite: the way that pain or discomfort is heightened by anticipation and tension. The key to understanding pleasure as a central good is to see how it fits with a conception of humanity contrasted to views describing the senses and their pleasures as traps and snares, portals through which evil comes.

One of the foremost results of renewed interest in art, literature and philosophy in the brilliant epoch we call the Renaissance was its fostering of an intelligent interest in human existence in the ordinary world, not for any instrumental purpose of salvation or a posthumous destiny in another world, but for life in the here and now, in this world, for its own sake. The chief mark of this was the appearance of a number of dissertations and essays on the subject of ‘the dignity of man’, starting with that great obstetrician of the Renaissance, Petrarch, and including Gianozzo Manetti’s *On the Excellency and Dignity of Man* (a direct reply to Pope Innocent III’s *On the Misery of Man*) and Pico Della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Their principal aim was to challenge the prevailing view of medieval theology that human existence in this world is a dangerous, temporary travail, a time of test and suffering, in which the devil and his agents are constantly working to snatch away immortal souls. By rigorous adherence to his duty and denial of the flesh, which is Satan’s entrance, a man could escape and achieve heaven at last. In the gloomy and intentionally minatory Christian *contemptus mundi* literature of the medieval period, each stage of life was represented as a site
of tribulation, from the vulnerability of childhood to the infirmity and decay of age. The agonies of the flesh, hunger and desire, disease, accident and injury, fear and worry, poverty and tyranny, were all depicted with macabre relish by the propagandists of this desperate outlook, to scare people into obedience to the Church and the temporal powers, an unholy and mutually convenient combination.

The response of humanism was to celebrate man’s reason, and the possibility of beauty in the body. Man’s reason equated him to the gods, and gave him power over things in the world. Animals are enslaved by their nature, condemned to eat one kind of food just in those parts of nature that supply it, and to follow blindly the cycle of their instincts. A human being can choose where to live, and can take his sustenance and provision from the variety of nature. He might not have the teeth of the tiger, the strength of the elephant, the pelt of the bear; but he can make spears as sharp as the tiger’s tooth, can organise himself into hunting parties stronger in their combination than the elephant, can clothe himself in the furs and skins of the creatures he hunts. And add to this his power of speech, with its infinite capacity to bring past and future into the present, and to span the world and the heavens with the wings it gives to his powers of imagination.

Perhaps the most marked departure from the Christian writers of the period labelled by Petrarch ‘the middle ages’ (because, he said, they threw a shadow over the interval between the brilliance of the classical past and the new age which drew its reviving inspiration from it) was the Renaissance’s lively appreciation of the body itself. For Christian moralists, the body was a betrayer, constantly threatening to revolt against the soul’s best interests, with its appetites and urgencies, its temptations and scarcely containable desires. Ascetès whipped and scourged themselves,
wore hair shirts and thorns, starved, even cut off their genitals. Origen, who famously ‘made himself a eunuch for the Kingdom of Heaven’, came to regret doing so; but he was far from alone among those who took drastic measures to subdue the flesh.

Humanists rejected these perversions. Instead they celebrated physical beauty, in paintings and poems, in their ethics and lives. They deeply appreciated the point of classical proportionings, in the spirit of Protagoras’ view that ‘man is the measure of all things’, which implied that houses, public buildings, townscapes, the very organisation of daily life, should reflect the human scale. They especially approved of the writings of Lactantius and Cicero that urged these principles, and (as it happened incorrectly) praised the fact that human beings were the only creatures with an upright posture, enabling them to look at the heavens, which they saw as a mark of his exalted nature and excellence.

Petrarch and his successors in the humanist tradition were not, of course, secularists in the sense that the later use of ‘humanism’ has come to entail, so they expressed themselves in a modified and refocused religious language, concentrating on such things as God’s assumption of human form to transact his New Testament with mankind, and on the teaching that God had made man in his own image – hence man’s beauty and fineness – and had even given man a godlike mandate over the world of nature. But above all, the fact that man was a concretion of body and soul meant that he was the very lynchpin of creation, joining and bridging the world of matter, time and mortality to the eternal world of truth and the spirit. This was in fact a revival of Neoplatonist doctrine dating from a millennium earlier, but it exactly suited humanist preoccupations. One of the most enthusiastic revivers of this outlook was Marsilio Ficino. As well as viewing humanity as the link point between earth
and heaven, Ficino saw man as emblematic of creation, as, indeed, the microcosm, which is to say: the universe in little. This idea came from Plato’s *Timaeus*, one of the few works of Plato known to all generations since it was written, so its doctrines had been much cited, but in the Renaissance it took on a revived and added significance. Much metaphysics went into making out what it implied; one suggestion was that man must be regarded as the microcosm because he consists of the same elements – earth, air, fire and water – as the macrocosm. Paracelsus taught that man was the knot tying earth and heaven because he conjoined to these four a fifth element, which was divine: the ‘quintessence’.

In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Pico Della Mirandola introduced an important shift into the developing picture of what it is to be human. He said that human beings have the capacity to make of themselves whatever they desired. This took humanity out of the lynchpin position at the centre of the Great Chain of Being, conceived as stretching from the lowliest existing things on one side – worms and insects – to the deity himself on the other side. Instead it emphasised man’s freedom, an agent in creation rather than a placeholder in its structure. Pico backed this claim by citing God’s licence to Adam to act as he saw fit with regard to what he had been given – namely, dominion over the sublunary world.

Pico’s view was influential in his own time, and has remained so ever since; indeed, it has grown in significance, recapturing the concept of individual autonomy – central to ethics – and even existential solitude, an idea that plays a central role in most forms and periods of a broadly romantic inspiration. In an extended application of the former concept it has influenced all thinking about individuality, involving in particular a growing appreciation of the place of the individual in society, and the relations of power, wealth
and rights that determine it. When it was believed that
heaven has the first call on everything of value to human
existence, it was of relatively little importance to answer
questions about what human beings are and what they need
in order to flourish in the here and now. As soon as atten-
tion is turned to this latter matter, a large number of deeply
significant considerations come suddenly into view, about
rights, justice, education, the proper organisation of society
to serve the ends of human flourishing, and more – in the
ideal, all bent towards making the good human life possible
in the natural course of a human lifetime, in this world,
now.

Given this, it is not too much to say that Pico’s reconfig-
uring of our view of humanity is one of the most crucial
nodes in the more recent history of ethics, reviving as it
does the Greek conception that because the interest of the
individual in the embodied life is central, things of this life
such as pleasure and beauty are, along with the government
of reason, essentials of lives worth living.