From the stories, poems, chronicled events, biographies and philosophical treatises that they have passed on to us, Greek thinkers from Homer and Heraclitus to Plotinus and Sextus Empiricus had a rich and varied notion of human existence and a keen interest in what it means to live a good life. This module explores these issues through an examination of Greek ethics.

The earliest “ethical” models were religious. Greeks were deeply pious and religious ritual was an accepted part of daily activity. These first models of proper human activity—found in Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Herodotus, and tragedy, for example—were based on the notion of divine intrusion in human activities. Doing the right thing was not based on any objective standard of right or wrong, but rather on apotropaism: averting ill through actions designed either to appease or not to anger the gods. In consequence, an action that assuaged one god at one time might annoy the same god at another time or distress a different god at the same time. Clearly Greek apotropaism as an answer to the question *What does it mean to live a good life?* was a fairly arbitrary answer.

By classical times (beginning around 500 B.C.), questions concerning good living were answered not apotropaically, but by an appeal to reason. On the implicit assumption of some measure of control of one’s own destiny, Greek philosophers sought to demythologize and to make a science of ethics. While the philosopher, Heraclitus, noted all things are in flux and gave dryness as a material condition of wisdom, Socrates turned away from material understanding of the cosmos and fixed his attention exclusively on human existence. Hereafter, Greek philosophers treated questions about good living as themselves worthy of serious philosophical exploration. Ethics as a branch of philosophy was born.

In this module, I essay to give readers a generous sampling of ancient Greek ethics from its earliest Homeric roots to the skepticism of Sextus in
the third century A.D. I begin with Homer, Hesiod and Herodotus in the first reading, then turn to Socratic ethics in reading two (Plato’s Apology). Reading three is an attempt at teasing out Plato’s own ethics from his work Gorgias. The fourth reading deals with Aristotle’s notion of happiness from his Nicomachean Ethics. Epicurean hedonism, with its affinity to modern utilitarianism, is the topic of reading five. In reading six, I cover the cynicism of Diogenes of Sinope. Stoic ethics, through the eyes of Epictetus in his Handbook, is the topic of reading seven. The eighth reading concerns the Pyrrhonianist skepticism of Sextus Empiricus and gives readers a broad understanding of the types of skepticism embraced throughout Greek antiquity. Last, in reading nine (“Greek Ethics: Then and Now”), I compare early Greek models with contemporary ones.

This sampling of Greek ethics is not meant to be exhaustive. I wish instead to give interested readers a solid basis for understanding different philosophical approaches to good living. In doing so, you will doubtless become familiarized both with Greek culture as it evolves over time and with other elements of Greek philosophy, such as metaphysics, epistemology, and even aesthetics. Those who are acquainted with contemporary approaches to morality and ethics will certainly see the roots of modern thought in Greek antiquity and come to recognize our debt to these ancients. As with study of different cultures that currently exist, the immediate payoff for attention to early Greek ethics and culture is greater understanding of ourselves today through the common thread of our shared humanity.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING


