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Unmasking the Maxim: An Ancient Genre And Why It Matters Now

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We live surrounded by maxims, often without even noticing them. They are easily dismissed as platitudes, banalities or harmless clichés, but even in an age of big data and number crunching we put them to work almost every day. A Silicon Valley whiz kid says, Move Fast and Break Things. Investors try to Buy Low and Sell High. Investigative reporters Follow the Money. Others Follow their Bliss. The lavish host thinks, The More the Merrier, while the Modernist architect is sure that Less is More. Captains of Industry whisper to themselves, Me First; captains of sinking ships shout, Women and Children First. Be Prepared was the Boy Scouts' marching song, while the Proud Boys Stand Down and Stand By, awaiting their marching orders.

Maxims are perhaps the smallest members in a large family of speech acts, which among the Greeks included proverbs, oracles, riddles, blessings, curses and lamentations. Not all of these continue in use, but maxims have found companions—mottos, mantras, advertising tag lines and jingles, slogans, political rallying cries, hashtags, three- or four-letter acronyms and 280 character tweets from the goddess Twitter. Familiarity, however, can breed contempt, or at least inattentiveness to the full range of their influence. Sometimes what sounds at first like empty verbiage turns into action. Bruce Lee adapted an old Taoist saying when he said, *Be Water*, and thereby provided what was for a while a surprisingly effective strategy for protesters in Hong Kong.

Maxims empower, for good or ill. In the hands of bigots or ideologues, they can turn deadly. *Sic Semper Tyrannis* shouted John Wilkes Booth after shooting Abraham Lincoln. A manufacturer of assault rifles urged potential customers to Earn Your Man Card. How better to earn it than to obey 8CHAN, a web site favored by white nationalists, with its own maxim, *Embrace Infamy*. A devotee of the site did just that, perpetrating a mass shooting in El Paso, Texas.

Maxims, then, should not be lightly dismissed. Since the ancient Greeks so relished maxims, they should surely be interrogated to help us better understand the power of these often underestimated speech acts. Before turning to the Greeks, however, the English word *maxim* needs a closer look.

ENGLISH "MAXIM"

ENGLISH BORROWED *maxim* from a Latin phrase and boiled it down for everyday use. In Latin writings about logic, the expression *maxima propositio*, *biggest proposition*, denoted a statement that did not need to be proved, but could provide the basis for proof of other, lesser propositions. This phraseology goes back at least to Boethius in the sixth century of our era. It's the equivalent of the generalizations that serve as the major premises in syllogistic logic.

If this makes maxims sound like the axioms of geometry, that is historically right. The starting points of plane geometry are propositions that *deserve* to be accepted; even without proof that they are worthy of belief. That's the meaning of the term *axiōma*. No one needs to prove that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other. Think about it; after a while it seems self-evident. It is worthy of assent. We might equally well call such an axiom a *maxim*; indeed, the earliest (1426) attested use of *maxim* in English is described in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "an axiom; a self-evident proposition assumed as a premise in mathematical, or dialectical reasoning."

This usage is now obsolete, but Thomas Jefferson understood the idea behind it, since he believed that there were such truths, waiting to be put to work in building a society where all people were equal and possess certain inalienable rights. He did not feel he had to prove these propositions; they were in his view self-evident. In using these ideas in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, he was, in effect, transferring to politics what Euclid had done in geometry. It was a swift, strategic stroke on his part, for, since self-evident truths require no argument or explanation, they focus discussion not on *whether* they are to be believed, but on *how* they can most expeditiously be implemented. That's the kind of work maxims can do for a statesman.

GREEK *GNŌMĒ*

SMALL STATEMENTS that made big truth claims were already in use in the third millennium BCE, as in the Egyptian *Maxims of Ptahhotep*. Yet, they are not common in Homer. When advice is given in his epics, it usually comes in the form of paradigmatic stories, or *exempla*, sometimes of Nestorian length. As short, salient observations became more common, they were often given the simple, unpretentious name of s*ayings*. Another term, *apothegms* (*apophthegmata)* could be used for any forceful, confident assertion (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.11.6, 1389 a 1). More revealing, however, is the term that eventually became most widely used for such sayings, g*nōmē*.

That word is etymologically related to English *know*, and the Greek verb *gignōskō*, *to know*. The kind of knowing represented by this verb, according to the lexicon of Liddell, Scott and Jones, is based on observation, in contrast to the knowledge obtained by reflection expressed through the verb *oida* and its relatives. Other words are used for the knowledge that comes from study and learning (*manthanō*, and cognates), or for the mastery a craftsman or a philosopher might attain, *epistēmē*. Since knowing for the Greeks

blossoms throughout such a wide semantic field, the verb *gignōskō* and its relative, the noun *gnōmē*, apply to a specific variety, the kind that results from observation. Thus, when the verb is used in the most famous of Greek maxims, *Gnōthi Sauton*, *Know Yourself*, it enjoins self-observation, not protracted navel gazing, but watchfulness and alertness to how one speaks and acts.

MAXIMS AS GENRE

INJUNCTIONS AND ADVICE-GIVING among the Greeks took many forms, some so prolix we call them after long-winded Nestor of the *Iliad*. Maxims are the opposite of his style of speaking. These have an almost modernist compression, from the two-word fusion of pun and riddle in *Sōma Sēma* (*The Body is a Marker*), to sayings expanded with what Aristotle called an "epilogue," a brief explanation of the consequences of following the maxim. Yet the shorter the better. For this, *Know Yourself* provided a template, setting the norms for those who would coin a maxim. First, it should apply to "human actions and with what should be chosen or avoided," as Aristotle phrased it (*Rhetoric* 2.21.2). Simple observations in the indicative, such as *Office Reveals The Man* (Solon, or possibly Bias of Priene), make good maxims, provided they send a message about acting in a commendable way.

Maxims can also be prohibitions, either implicitly as in *Mēden Agan*, *Avoid Excess*, or explicitly, through a verb in the imperative. Indeed, imperatives, whether commands or prohibitions, rule the roost, though they observe a tacit taboo against being expressed in the plural. Maxims also avoid personal names and the vocative case, and the first person; there is never a "Verily, verily, I say unto you." The authority of a maxim derives not from the reputation of its speaker, but from the plausibility of what is said. Thus they allow no place for claims of inspiration. In this respect they are akin to riddles and the opposite of oracles or prophecies.

Early Greek maxims practice the art of compression. They waste no words equivocating or exploring alternatives. Even the phrase "on the one hand . . . on the other," beloved by most Greeks, is banned, nor do they provide room for evidence, proofs or supporting arguments.

All conditional statements are also left aside, as if waiting for poets of a later age to put them to work, as Thomas Gray did, reminding his listeners "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." A conditional clause is fine in English poetry but not in Greek maxims where succinctness is all. Likewise, poetic accoutrements are stripped away. Simile seems forbidden among early maxims, and even metaphor is rare, except for a few drawn from the human body, as in the perennial "One Hand Washes Another" (first in Epicharmus DK 23B30). The maxims of the Greeks are like their proverbs: vivid language is suspect. In English, *Birds of a Feather Flock Together*, while Greek says simply *homoios homoiōi*, *Similar to Similar*. Even imagery is avoided, since for the Greeks generalization involved abstraction, while in English maxims and proverbs are full of hot iron, spilled milk, rolling stones, glass houses, stitches in time, and dogs, some lying asleep, while old ones struggle to learn new tricks.

The Greeks allowed their maxims to keep an occasional adverb in place, but every adjective was peeled away. Imagery, figures of speech, oratorical flourishes were all stripped off, left like clothing on the shore of a woodland lake, while the maxim, lean and muscular, churns its way toward the opposite shore. What was its goal? To reinforce beleaguered values? Perhaps, since even long-established values sometimes need new support. We should not be surprised, however, if the goal is sometimes to present a fresh insight and invite the listener to decide whether to reject it or put it to work.

These are the norms that shaped a genre that emerged among the early Greeks. As in all genres, the norms worked in two directions, governing both the coinage of maxims and the understanding of those who heard them. A modern ex-

ample may help clarify the point: "All men are created equal" is not a statement of fact but a maxim, a moral principle and call to action. Maxims not only give voice to such principles, certain values are hard wired into them—notably succinctness, focus, confidence and independent-mindedness.

The Greek maxim was, I suppose, only a minor genre, sub-literary some would say, eclipsed by epic, tragedy, comedy and other justly-admired literary forms—but a genre, nonetheless, often overlooked in histories of literature but not by ancient writers. They took advantage of a distinctive feature of this genre—maxims are so compact that they fit into the pockets of other literary forms. While maxims could stand on their own, individually or clustered with other maxims, they could also be made part of other works, a tragedy, for example, or a philosophical treatise. One can meet a maxim almost anywhere in Greek literature, since many authors knew there was nothing quite like them to focus attention, drive home a point and be remembered.

Mastery of the norms of this genre demands our respect. It requires a high level of ability to generalize through abstraction, and in addition the skill carefully to craft language to express as much as possible in as few words as possible. It's hard work. Try it sometime. In antiquity success brought with it recognition of what they called *sophiē*, not *wisdom* as much as *cleverness*. Those who achieved it were *sophoi*, *clever*, *skillful* or even *sagacious*. Coin a good maxim and become a Sage.

RUSTIC BEGINNINGS?

THE GREEKS TRACED the roots of their maxims not to the courtyards of priests and rulers, but to down-to-earth life. We might expect that would point directly to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, whose many maxims give advice useful to those who live in an agricultural community. That is not, however, the way Plato saw it. In the *Protagoras*, Socrates discusses

the wisdom to be found in Crete and Lacedaemon, and that while their most ordinary citizens may not be much good at chit-chat, they may at any moment let loose "some notable saying, terse and compressed," as if they were experts at the javelin (342e). From that observation he draws a straight line to the legendary Seven Sages who spoke with similar brevity and cogency (343a). Stories about these Sages may have drawn on rural mnemonics or folk wisdom, but the Sages themselves were almost all men of distinction, drawn together in a popular legend.

THE FOUNDING LEGENDS OF THE SEVEN SAGES

A TRIPOD, A BOWL and a golden cup were the starting points of the legends of these Sages. The stories are indeed legends, but their importance reaches far beyond the bits of verifiable history embedded within them, for legends can preserve cultural attitudes and values that might otherwise be lost, forgotten or undervalued.

A story about Milesian fishermen illustrates the point. They had hauled up in their net a valuable tripod, then argued with a group who had contracted to buy the catch. At last the town authorities defused the dispute by referring it to Delphi where the oracle declared the tripod belonged to "the wisest." Then, according to Diogenes Laertius (DL 1.27f.), the Milesians awarded it to their most esteemed citizen, Thales. He, however, demurred, sent the tripod to another, and that person to yet another, until it came to Solon of Athens, who declared that Apollo was the wisest, and sent the tripod to Delphi as a dedication to the god.

Similar stories about a bowl and a golden cup differ in their details but all envision an object that poses the question who is the wisest, and various possible claimants of that title defer to one another. The stories thereby model what might be called deferential wisdom. It's a sharp contrast to the Homeric injunction, *Always Strive to Excel and Surpass All Others*

(*Iliad* 6.208). The legend of the Sages, by contrast, holds up a model based not on an exceptional individual, but on a congenial group bound together by their shared sagacity.

The origin of the legends about these Sages cannot be dated with precision, but they fit plausibly into the cultural setting of Archaic Greece, perhaps not later than the sixth century BCE when several of these sages are known to have been active. Eventually, the legend envisioned seven such colleagues and called them *sophoi*, a word that almost never occurs in Homer, who prefers to speak of *craftiness*, *mētis*, especially when Odysseus is in view. Over time, though, *sophiē* comes to express a central value of the Greeks, from Classical to Byzantine times, and the Seven Sages embody it.

WHY SEVEN?

NATURALLY, SUCH PEOPLE gravitated toward one another—*homoios homoiōi*. Legend had them meet, perhaps annually, at places of high status, including Delos and Delphi, and even the court of King Croesus of Lydia. And naturally, too, there had to be seven of them, for seven, then as now, was a powerful number, beloved of magicians and expressive of close bonding. Long before Snow White and her friends, the seven brides for seven brothers, seven deadly sins, seven seals on the book of the apocalypse and seven wonders of the ancient world, there were Pleiades up in the sky and down on earth philosophers who paid their respects to the number:

> There are seven vowels (sc., in the Greek alphabet), seven strings to the scale, seven Pleiades; most animals (though not all) lose their teeth in the seventh year; and there were seven heroes who attacked Thebes.
>
> (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1093a13)

When applied to the Sages the number seven underlines the coherence of view among them. Seven Sages came to be renowned as proto-philosophers, but most were also known

for their political leadership, as Aelian pointed out:

> Philosophers too have engaged in politics . . . Solon [in] Athens, Bias and Thales performed great services in Ionia, Chilon in Sparta, Pittacus for Mytilene, Cleoboulus for Rhodes.
>
> (*Historical Miscellany* 3.17, tr. N. G. Wilson)

Aelian, however, lists only six names. Who was the seventh? There are plenty of candidates. Periander, famed ruler of Corinth, may have been on early lists before his reputation became tarnished with charges of incest and other depravities (Herodotus 3.49–52, 5.92ff.). Instead of him Plato and others have the obscure Myson from the equally obscure town of "Gander" (*Chēn*). In another version Anacharsis, Solon's guest friend from Scythia, is included; in yet another, Epimenides of Crete.

DOES 7 = 17?

ALL IN ALL, seventeen names appeared in one or another of the ancient lists of these Sages, according to the Peripatetic biographer Hermippus (DL 1.42). That's no surprise. Legends are not shaped by the heavy hand of historical exactitude, but by a creative exploration of themes that have cultural resonance, in this case *sophiē*, *cleverness and sagacity* veering into *wisdom*. That's the way legends often work: over time names, stories, sayings, are added to a narrative core, while other details fade away.

GENDERED SPEECH

ALL THE SAGES on all the lists were men, and proud of it, to judge from Thales' threefold thanksgiving to Tychē, the divinity who bestowed luck: "first that I was born a human being and not an animal, then a man and not a woman, and finally a Greek and not a barbarian" (DL 1.33). One might hope to find on one of these lists Sappho of Lesbos, whom

Socrates numbered among the "wise men and women of old" (Plato, *Phaedrus* 235b) but neither she nor any other woman is mentioned. That may not be entirely the result of the widespread prejudice against women reflected, for example, in the gnomic poetry of another sixth-century Milesian, Phocylides. There may also have been a consensus that some forms of speech were for men, and others for women—maxims being a male speech form, while two other speech patterns were associated with women—riddles and verse prophecies. Women found a strong voice for themselves in these forms. Prophecies given by the Pythias at Delphi show that women, like men, mastered the challenge of oral composition in dactylic hexameter. Women seem also to have been good at riddles. They had a mythic paradigm in the Sphinx and a legendary one in Cleobouline of Lindos, who was said to have composed riddles in hexameter verse.

While maxims could be riddling or paradoxical, their blunt, direct commanding way was guy-talk, while women, excluded from direct participation in war and civic decision making, were more likely to express themselves obliquely, with greater alertness, perhaps, to ambiguity and complexity. Riddles and prophecies in verse were perfect for this; maxims, especially those phrased as succinct commands or prohibitions, were better suited to action under pressure, or, it turns out, to playing wisdom games when old sages gathered.

FUN, GAMES, SYMPOSIA?

BUILDING ON the tradition that the Sages met at places of high visibility, Plutarch in his essay on the Seven Sages envisions a meeting near the Gulf of Corinth with the notorious Periander as host. The gathering turns into a symposium, perhaps a fictitious one, but this iteration of the legend may be onto something—a reminder that the sayings of the Sages and perhaps other maxims as well were not dry-as-dust

entries in a notebook but performance art before a possibly obstreperous audience, merry, raucous and drunken on occasion. Real life symposia were times for banter, singing, drinking games and from time to time sex with flute-girl entertainers. Literary symposia, a genre going back at least to Plato, were more highbrow affairs, in which each participant gave an ostensibly ex tempore speech, each trying to surpass the other, simultaneously philosophizing and having outrageous fun.

The Seven Sages liked to pose ostensibly easy questions to one another, with the expectation that the answers would be original or surprising. The question, "What is difficult?" for example, elicited the answer from Bias of Priene, "Nobly to endure changes for the worse" (DL 1.86), while Thales, when asked a similar question used the famous maxim *Know Yourself* for his answer. Pittacus's answer ("It's difficult to be a good man") reverberated over the years, first in a poem of Simonides, then in Socrates' explication of it in Plato's *Protagoras* (339a–347a).

The Sages are also represented as talking about clever laws, such as Pittacus's idea of imposing a double penalty on anyone who committed a crime while drunk (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 2.25.7, 1402 and DL 1.76). Sometimes they reflected on law itself, as in Solon's aphorism, "Laws are like spiders' webs: anything light and flimsy gets trapped by them, while whatever is large and strong escapes" (DL 1.58).

Maxims, too, were at home amid the playfulness of the Sages. Such a setting makes it easy to recognize that they were crafted for display, one-upmanship, and approval by their listeners. Sometimes their audience consisted of the other Sages; sometimes the Sages seem to have imagined themselves speaking to a young man, as in Solon's injunction "Learn to Obey Before You Command," or in Chilon's "Protect Yourself, and Do Not Make an Extravagant Marriage" (DL 1.70). The maxims of the Sages sometimes turn the obvious into the unexpected, as when Pittacus advised the Phocaeans who

were searching for someone *energetic* (*spoudaios)*, "If you search too hard, you won't find him" (DL 1.77). Sayings of the Sages such as this one have a way of stopping listeners in their tracks, as in the injunction "Make Haste Slowly," or when Epimenides of Crete affirmed that "All Cretans are Liars." One way or another the sayings of these Sages were crafted to amuse, surprise, puzzle, challenge, but surely to display their cleverness, their *sophiē*. That left, of course, the problem of interpreting the maxims.

INTERPRETING A MAXIM

THE GREEKS seem not to have been troubled by conflicts within their legends; they even seem to have delighted in proposing differing interpretations of some maxims. Certainly they did not always agree, nor feel any need to agree, on the interpretation of Know Yourself, as Plutarch noted (*Moralia* 408e) and as Peter Struck has reminded us in the introduction to *Divination and Human Nature (*2018). The meaning of a maxim need not be on its surface as one attributed to Periander of Corinth shows: *Educate Children* (DL 1.40). The two words at first seem simple, even banal. Of course, kids need education. But which kids? Your sons? Surely. Also the sons of all your fellow citizens? Those of resident aliens? Or *all* children, girls included? The maxim invites such questions, but does not answer them. It leaves it to listeners to think for themselves. That's also true of another maxim of Periander: "Give daughters to husbands, maidens in years, but women in mind." Diogenes Laertius (1.91f.), who preserved this maxim, provides his interpretation by adding, "thus signifying that girls need to be educated as well as boys."

One further example shows how the maxims invite and challenge interpretation: the Scythian Anacharsis was in some versions of the legend co-opted as one of the Seven. He too coined maxims, most famously, "Restrain Tongue, Belly, Crotch" (DL 1.104). On the surface, it seems just another

affirmation of the desirability of self-control, and to be easily dismissed with the objection, "But how am I to achieve this goal?" Among the Sages, however, it is wise to reflect a moment before jumping to a conclusion. Perhaps the sequence of commands contains a clue to their interpretation. Start with watching what you say, that is, by controlling your tongue. Then, work on managing the cravings of appetite. With both tongue and belly restrained it may ultimately be possible to control even the sex drive. Is that *the* true meaning of Anacharsis's saying? Probably not, for maxims pave no road to certainty. nor do they invoke some external authority, divine or human, to impose an interpretation on what are often puzzling or paradoxical sayings. The listener is the one to decide whether to follow the advice or shrug it off. That empowers the individual, even if at the societal level it may replace established sources of authority—taboos, traditions, deference to those with wealth or power—with a disruptive truth. Only a dyed-in-the-wool aristocrat would consider that "subversive," yet when maxims encouraged individuals to decide for themselves, they pointed to an alternative to established source of authority.

Although we cannot date with any precision the emergence of the legend of the Seven Sages, it makes best sense within the political and cultural transitions of the late sixth century BCE. The Sages whose political or cultural accomplishments are historically attested—Thales, Solon and Periander, for example—all belong in this century. No less significantly, at this time Greek attitudes concerning authority were changing and the power structures of many Greek cities were under stress, sometimes shifting from traditional aristocracies to "tyrannies," that is, into management by a single strongman. Late in that century democratic systems of government begin to emerge along with new sources of authority and new modes of thought and persuasion. It's a time when individual decision-making is coming into its own—a perfect environment for the maxim.

A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

MAXIMS MAY SEEM simple on their surface but, as we have seen, they emerge from a complex process involving insight, abstraction, generalization and the compressed use of language. The Greeks called the result of that process a *gnōmē* and applied the term not only to maxims but also to ideas, plans, proposals and propositions, and sometimes to the intelligence that produced them. But what if that process were extrapolated until it became not a flash of insight or momentary state but a lasting habit of mind? Could it shape a personality, a whole life, maybe even a culture?

Solon, I believe, made such an extrapolation and struggled with questions of this sort, expressing the results in what may be the two most perplexing lines of his surviving poetry. Literally translated they read:

> While the obscure measure of *gnōmosynē* is very hard to fathom,
> it alone controls the limits of everything.
>
> (fr. 16 West. tr. R. McKim)

In the Greek, the word in the emphatic first position, *gnōmosynē,* is never attested in earlier texts. It's a coinage, most likely by Solon himself, combining *gnōmē* with *–synē*, a suffix often used to form words that reach beyond specific thoughts, actions or practices to a more general cast of mind. Thus, *gnōmē* denotes something specific, a maxim, plan, proposal or the insight behind them, while *gnōmosynē* generalizes; it's a habit or lasting cast of mind, or more precisely the generating principle behind such thoughts and speech acts. Greek had no term for such a cast of mind until *gnōmosynē* was coined. Nor is there a good translation of it in English—*prudence* and *judgment* don't catch the contrast with *gnōmē*, while *wisdom* reduces the couplet to a platitude. To understand the term it's best to listen for echoes in other Greek words such as *mnēmosynē* (memory), *dikaio-*

synē (justice), or *sōphrosynē* (caution)). Each of these words points beyond any specific act or occasion to an enduring mind set.

Our source for these lines, the learned Clement of Alexandria, took this thought experiment one step further, seeing in *gnōmosynē* not a special form of human wisdom, but an aspect of God. He may have been on the right track; after all, it is not *gnōmosynē* itself that is so hard to understand but its "obscure measure," that is, its allotment in greater or lesser measure by forces governing the universe.

The term *gnōmosynē* never took root among the Greeks. The concept behind it, however—that *gnōmē* in one form or other might shape all things and guide a person's life—had a powerful influence, not least on the poetry of Theognis of Megara.

THEOGNIS OF MEGARA

THE VERSES in elegiac meter ascribed to Theognis come in many small units, so brief and fragment-like that many scholars regard the text as a collection of individual poems, some possibly originating well before the stated date of his birth in 544 BCE. Yet themes of love and betrayal run through and integrate what is, I am convinced, a subtle, ironic and moving text. To be sure, it is not easily untangled and all too easily relegated to the cubbyhole of "gnomic poetry." Although some manuscripts entitle the work *The Gnōmai of Theognis*, this is probably not a title given by the original author, but it's a useful reminder of the importance of maxims in the poem. But the poem is not just a compilation of high-minded advice. It's also a love poem, or rather a poem about an unsuccessful attempt at seduction. It consists of advice and exhortations from an older man to a *pais*, a boy, with whom he has fallen in love. Maxims and similar advice-giving are the principal way by which the speaker in these verses tries to communicate with young Cyrnus:

I admit, son of Polypaüs, that I've yet to be able to please
everybody in town—and no wonder, since not even Zeus
can win universal approval, whether he sends the rain
or holds it off. But out of my special benevolence toward you,
Cyrnus, I'll pass along to you the very precepts
that I learned from noble men when I was young.
(24–28, tr. R. McKim)

The sweet-sounding advice giving, however, gradually turns sour. "Don't Get Mixed up with Disreputable Types" (36) may be friendly counsel, but the speaker's anxiety becomes more evident, ("Either love me sincerely or renounce me, hate me, and quarrel openly," 89f., tr. Gerber). Increasingly the advice-giving turns into scolding; near the end of the poem the condemnation of Cyrnus is explicit:

A ship hits a rock; you let slip my friendship.
You've grabbed hold of a rotten lifeline, my boy.
(1361f.)

Poor kid, browbeaten by someone who seems oblivious to the irony of the situation: for surely it is not so much Cyrnus who lacks thoughtfulness and good judgment as the Theognis figure himself.

Gnōmē in various garbs and guises shapes the work. It's what Theognis repeatedly tries to instill in Cyrnus, thinking that it will bring the lad to his senses and, he surely hopes, to his bed. That doesn't work, but maxims do help structure an otherwise fractious poem.

True, the most famous of all Greek maxims, *Know Yourself*, finds no place in the poem—perhaps Theognis was not eager for self-understanding—but its counterpart, *Avoid Excess*, recurs, as a virtual refrain, throughout one part of the poem. Metrically, *Mēden Agan* fits neatly into the start of a dactylic line, and is easily expanded with an infinitive or imperative to indicate a specific extreme to be avoided. At this maxim's first occurrence in the poem (219) it reinforces Theognis's advice to Cyrnus not to be overly upset about local political contes-

tations but to keep to the middle of the road. Later (335) the maxim is restated, again at the beginning of a line, warning Cyrnus to avoid excessive haste (*speudein*). *Mēden Agan* returns a third time in line 401, again as a warning to Cyrnus against excessive haste, but now reinforcing the earlier advice with a second maxim: The Right Moment (*kairos*) is Best (*aristos*) in All Human Affairs. (This echoes a maxim ascribed to one of the Seven Sages, Chilon of Sparta, "*Mēden Agan*: At the Right Moment (*kairos*) All Fine Things Come About" (DL 1.41)).

These three uses of the familiar maxim exemplify the earlier advice (319) to use *gnōmē* as a guiding principle:

> Cyrnus, a good man (*agathos . . . anēr*) always holds tightly on to *gnōmē*.

Although following *gnōmē* is admittedly not easy, and *gnōmē* itself can cause men to stumble and fall (1221f.), it is, nonetheless, the finest gift of the gods to humans (831f.) and has power not unlike that which Solon ascribed to its relative *gnōmosynē*:

> The gods, Cyrnus, grant *gnōm*ē to mortals, the noblest thing.
> Man by *gnōm*ē controls the limits of each thing.
> Blessed is he whose wits possess it—it is much better
> than hurtful Hybris or baneful Bloat,
> for from these, Cyrnus, comes all wretchedness.
>
> (1171–76)

The importance of *gnōm*ē is also emphasized in another way, by ruminations on its absence. Immediately after his mini-lecture on avoiding excessive haste, Theognis rebukes Cyrnus, telling him:

> . . . you have slipped up; I'm not to blame, not in the least!
> You yourself, are the one with no good judgment (*gnōm*ē).
>
> (407f.)

Later, Theognis explores the absence of *gnōmē* with even greater intensity, evoking Solon fr.16, by turning Solon's rare word *gnōmosyn*ē into a negative:

> Than *gnōmē* nothing is better for a man to have in and for himself. And nothing, Cyrnus, is more grief-filled than *agnōmosynē*.
>
> (895f.)

The echo of Solon fr.16, albeit through the negative, has ironic overtones, for Solon's lines emphasized the importance of measure or moderation, precisely what Theognis is lacking in his head-over-heels love for Cyrnus.

The advice-giving in Theognis never works, not even when Theognis seems to address himself with the maxim "One must endure whatever the gods give mortal men" (591f.). He can never abandon hope that advice will somehow prevail over what he has learned from myth:

> Cruel Eros, the spirits of Madness took you up and nursed you. Because of you Troy's acropolis was destroyed, and great Theseus, Aegeus's son, and noble Ajax, Oileus's son, through your acts of recklessness.
>
> (1231–34)

The poem draws to a close with this bleak observation in mind. No one, it seems, even great heroes, even when guided by *gnōmē*, can stand up against Eros.

FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN

THE MEMORABLE BREVITY of maxims made them well suited to the predominantly oral culture that prevailed in early Greece. In Solon and Theognis can be seen, however, the use of writing to transmit stories, ideas, and knowledge. Soon, perhaps first in Pherecydes of Syros (probably in a book called *The Seven Recesses*), writing was used for extended treatises, in which ideas and narratives with supporting evidence and arguments could be presented to readers. From that, step by step, came the development of many works of philosophy, history, biography and ultimately of the mode of thought we call discursive reasoning. We might expect,

as this development gained strength, maxims would lose the prominence they once enjoyed and gradually fade away.

That was not what happened. Instead, maxims adapted successfully to written culture, sometimes by summarizing, sharpening and driving home the point of an argument, sometimes by being gathered together and disseminated in book form. Although it is not clear when the maxims of the Seven Sages were first presented in written form, a passage in Xenophon's *Memorabilia* suggests that this had happened by the late fifth century BCE. In this passage (4.2.8ff.). Socrates asked a young man, Euthydemus, if the rumor was true that he had a "large collection of books written by the so-called sages of the past."

When Euthydemus proudly answers yes, Socrates compliments him, since, he says, "the *gnōmai* of wise men make those who possess them wealthy in excellence (*aretē*)." That, as one might expect, sets off a Socratic examination of what such excellence really is. As the conversation progresses, the focus of these books becomes clear. It is not excellence in general or on advice for a craftsman or physician, but excellence that "makes someone a political leader or administrator, able to hold office in a way that benefits other people and himself" (4.2.11). This is consistent with the emphasis on political and civic matters in many maxims attributed to the Seven Sages and others. Writing, moreover, consolidates the form as well as the content of material previously transmitted orally. That can be seen in the role that maxims came to play at Delphi.

DELPHI AND ITS MAXIMS

IT MAY SEEM surprising to find that Delphi took kindly to maxims, for oracles and maxims are in many respects opposites. Maxims imply that they are general truths which apply *semper et ubique*, while oracular responses are usually answers to questions about a specific situation, often a ritual matter. Nor did oracles and maxims make similar claims

about their authority; maxims relied not on backing from the gods or on inspiration, but on the plausibility evident to any thoughtful listener.

The one exception comes from a story that the god Apollo inspired his human intermediary, the first Pythia, Phemonoe (Antisthenes in DL 1.40), to proclaim the two most famous maxims. That story contradicted another in which the Sages met at Delphi and "dedicated to Apollo the often repeated *Know Yourself* and *Avoid Excess*" (Pausanias 10.24.1, following Plato, *Protagoras* 343b). These two maxims were inscribed where no one could miss them—at the entrance way to Apollo's temple (Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2). The Delphic authorities, that is, decided not to ignore or belittle maxims, but to co-opt them.

That was a clever move on their part, avoiding a potentially awkward conflict between maxims and prophecies, or, in a broader cultural sense, between *gnōmē* and inspiration. At Delphi both ways of achieving wisdom were recognized and esteemed, so much so that Delphi came to be the most prominent place where maxims were preserved and disseminated. Indeed, in the fifth century of our era the anthologist John Stobaeus could cite 147 of them that had been collected at Delphi. With backing from Delphi, maxims of this form found their way even to the most remote parts of the Greek world.

THE AI KHANOUM MAXIMS

HAVING LAID CLAIM to the wisdom of maxims, Delphi helped disseminate them. Copies of Delphic maxims are found in Mysia in Asia Minor and on the island of Thera, and in the most remote of all Greek cities—one on the banks of the river that today divides Russia from Afghanistan. The city was founded in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Its design followed to a large extent the pattern of a Greek polis, though its population was ethnically and culturally

diverse. While its site has been excavated, its name has not been found, so it is referred to by the name of a neighboring village, Ai Khanoum. In the third century BCE, Clearchus, a resident of the city, found reason to make the 2,500 mile trek to Delphi. When he returned he brought with him the text of five maxims he had found at the sanctuary. He saw to it that they were chiseled onto a stone at a memorial to Cineas, the city's founder. The inscription reads:

> These wise sayings of men of former times,
> the words of famous men, are consecrated
> at holy Pytho; from there Clearchus copied them carefully,
> to set them up, shining afar,
> in the precinct of Cineas.

Then follow the five maxims:

> When a child show yourself well behaved;
> When a young man, self-controlled;
> In middle age, just;
> As an old man, a good counsellor;
> At the end of your life, free from sorrow.
>
> (tr. S. Wallace, modified)

The maxims offered advice to anyone who encountered them, just as many other maxims did, but with a difference—they are arranged in sequence, from childhood to old age, with a promise at the end. Follow these rules and you will end your life with no regrets.

While the maxims in remote Ai Khanoum gave their advice to anyone who encountered them, they also had another role, a civic one, for they affirmed the Hellenic identity of the settlement. They encapsulated core values of Hellenic culture—justice, moderation, self-restraint, wise counsel. Their Delphic origin, moreover, linked the city to the most venerated of Greek shrines and a focal point of Greek culture.

THE SOCIAL UTILITY OF MAXIMS

THE IDEA that maxims had societal as well as personal value was deeply engrained in Greek society. One writer, perhaps Menedemus of Eretria, put it this way:

> By maxims of men are cities well administered,
> And households, too, not by twitterings and twangings.
> (DL 6.104)

These "twitterings and twangings," most likely refer to the music performed on religious occasions. Ceremonies, aimed at pleasing the gods and winning their help, might begin with a call for sacred silence, but soon music broke out, both in small private ceremonies and in grand civic festivals such as the Panathenaea and the City Dionysia in Athens. All this, the philosopher implies, might be fine for worshipping the gods, but was of little practical value when running a household or managing a city. In such settings religious noise making was just "twitterings and twangings." Maxims, on the other hand, provided useful advice in succinct form. The philosopher's message is fully in the mode of Greek secularism, not denying the reality of the gods, but putting responsibility squarely on human shoulders and pointing to human sources of help for human problems.

The author of these verses was not alone in recognizing the social role of maxims. Aristotle knew that maxims were valuable in shaping civic discourse, as can be seen in his discussion of them in his *Rhetoric* (2.21). Orators speaking when citizens were making decisions in an assembly or court would find maxims useful in driving home their point, even if the maxim were imported from a non-political domain. In Thucydides the Athenian commander Nicias does just that when he used Hippocrates' famous maxim "First, Do No Harm" (*Epidemics* 1.2) to persuade the Athenians to avoid a potentially disastrous expedition to Sicily—to no avail, but the

maxim did no harm to Nicias's case.

Such minor indications of the societal role of maxims fade into the background when compared to their central place among the Pythagoreans. There maxims found a new role and took on new forms as well.

THE PEOPLE OF THE MAXIM

MAXIMS among the Greeks knew few boundaries. Horace Greeley's advice, "Go West, Young Man," leads our inquiry to Croton in southern Italy where in the late sixth century BCE a community of friends and followers formed around a charismatic immigrant from Samos. His name was Pythagoras. The Pythagoreans were a taciturn and rather secret group whose community, it seems, was shaped to a large extent by the maxims of its founder. His followers took seriously the advice ascribed to Pythagoras in Stobaeus "Do not say a few things in many words, but much in a few words," becoming thereby the people of the maxim, and providing even now a paradigm of how maxims can shape a society. Many writers influenced by Pythagoras expressed themselves in maxim form, but two complementary types can be recognized: first, enigmatic sayings called *symbola*, and, second, sayings offering more straight-forward advice about how to lead a good life.

MAXIMS AS SYMBOLA

THE GREEK WORD is the ancestor of our word symbol, but was often used in a concrete sense, to refer to tokens, signet rings or secret codes, that is, to things whose meaning was not right on the surface. The Pythagoreans used the word *symbola* for sayings that challenged their listener to probe below the surface and come up with an interpretation consistent with Pythagorean ideals.

These *symbola*, like many maxims of the Seven Sages, were phrased as succinct commands, but their content is regularly

a prohibition with no apparent rhyme or reason. They often sound like taboos, superstitious prohibitions, or just plain silliness. The most famous of them, "Don't Eat Beans" (DL 8.23), is a perennial source of merriment. The name *symbola*, however, reminds us to probe below the surface to find the real meaning. Interpreters have been doing that for centuries, almost since the sayings were coined. In some cases an interpretation may be easy enough, as for the injunction "Do Not Eat Heart." Our English expression "Don't Eat Your Heart Out" reminds us that this is not a dietary restriction but a warning not to "waste your life in troubles and pains" (DL 8.18). Others are more challenging but perhaps of a similar cast: "Don't Stir a Fire with a Knife." Diogenes suggests it means not to rouse your passions or a bursting temper. Hierocles of Alexandria, who in the fifth century CE explicated thirty-nine of these *symbola*, saw it differently. While agreeing that fire betokens anger, he sees it as advice about restraining speech, for, "by governing the tongue and being quiet, friendship is produced from strife, the fire of anger being extinguished, and you yourself will not appear to be destitute of intellect." Some earlier interpretations of Pythagorean *symbola* can be found in Athenaeus's book *The Sophists at Dinner* (10.452), and in our ever-present guide, Diogenes Laertius in his life of Pythagoras (DL 8.17). It is not clear, however, that there was only one acceptable interpretation for each of these *symbola*.

What were the functions of these puzzling *symbola* among the Pythagoreans? Diogenes Laertius provides a clue in his praise of Pythagoras:

> He was a rather good craftsman of friendship, both in other ways and if he learned someone had adopted his *symbola*, he immediately drew him into his circle and made a "friend" of him. (DL 8.16)

Friendship, understood as harmonious equality, was the inner bond of a Pythagorean community. Someone seeking admission to this circle of friends might be confronted with

one or more of these *symbola*, like a postulant in a Zen monastery. Those who showed an understanding of its inner or symbolic meaning, could be deemed worthy of Pythagorean friendship. These *symbola*, then, are not advice or takeaways from the great man, still less are they superstitious taboos. They are exercises in spiritual discernment and thereby the entrance key to the community. This is, I suspect, a new function for the maxim, but is not the only way the Pythagoreans put them to use.

THE PUBLIC VOICE OF THE PYTHAGOREANS

ALTHOUGH PYTHAGORAS was said to have given public lectures, and to have written several books expounding his teachings, the shorter medium of the maxim may have had a wider and more long-lasting influence. These were not the *symbola*, but other, more accessible sayings, some coined by his followers, others attributed to his daughter, or possibly wife, Theano (Suda Theta 83 Adler). If so, hers would be the first, and probably only, female voice in the otherwise all male chorus of ancient maxim chanters. (Ancient sources often say maxims were sung or chanted.) Some maxims were attributed to Pythagoras himself, including fifty-five which Stobaeus ferreted out for his anthology. Some of these are more complex than the succinct maxims of yesteryear. They can be clusters of maxim-like sayings functioning as mini-sermons, for example:

> Pythagoras said, it is requisite to choose the most excellent life; for habit will make it pleasant. Wealth is an infirm anchor, glory is still more infirm; and in a similar manner, the body, dominion, and honor. For all these are weak and powerless. What then are powerful anchors? Prudence, magnanimity, fortitude. These no tempest can shake. This is a divine law, that virtue is the only thing that is strong, and that everything else is a trifle.

Such sayings attributed to Pythagoras have little to do with doctrines distinctive of the Pythagorean community. Instead,

they present rules for ethical conduct, some of which affirm values widely accepted among the Greeks, while others challenge assumptions such as the benefits of being wealthy or famous. These maxims present the Pythagoreans as a benign presence in Greek life—not the whole story, by any means, for the Pythagoreans were often controversial, politically and intellectually. If the *symbola* were the entrance key to that community, these maxims provided a way of reaching a broader public with a positive message. That can be seen as well in other maxims of the Pythagoreans.

GOLDEN VERSES ASCRIBED TO PYTHAGORAS

SEVENTY-ONE HEXAMETERS, called *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*, circulated in antiquity and enjoyed renewed popularity in the Renaissance, when they were among the first Greek texts to be disseminated through the new medium of print. They were translated into French in the seventeenth century, and soon thereafter into English. As a Google Ngram clearly shows, the verses continued to be read with some frequency until the mid-nineteenth century. Although they are now forgotten by all but a few specialists and devotees, they are a reminder of the prominent role of maxims in the revival of the Greek classics.

These maxims, however, are in verse, seventy-one hexameters. Moreover, like the Ai Khanoum maxims, they have a structure, a beginning, a middle and an end. "First," they say, "worship the immortal gods as they are established and ordained by law." Then respect the oath, and the heroes, *daimones*, and parents. The verses segue next to friendship and virtue, culminating with this promise for those who have followed their injunctions:

> And when you, having divested yourself of your mortal body, and arrive at the most pure *aithēr*, you will be as a god, immortal, incorruptible, and Death shall have no dominion.
>
> (vs. 70–71, tr. W. Bridgman, modified)

In the *Golden Verses* maxims have come a long way from practical advice giving. Now they offer cosmic reassurance, not least to those who accepted the stories of Greco-Roman mythology. No need to fear the horrors of the river Styx, the three headed Cerberus, the lasting punishments or fluttering shadow-existence described in traditional stories about the underworld. The message of the *Golden Verses* is, Look up, not down; imagine the crystal clear atmosphere above all earthly pollution. That is where the Olympian gods live. You can live there, too. You can become a god.

This is not an empty promise, for these maxims also provide a method to attain that goal, a verse by verse progression, especially evident in passages such as this:

> Never allow sleep to close your eyelid when you go to bed,
> Until you have examined by your reason all your actions of the day.
> Wherein have I done amiss? What have I done? What have I omitted that I ought to have done?
> If in this examination you find that you have done amiss, reprimand yourself severely for it;
> And if you have done any good, rejoice.
> Practice thoroughly all these things; meditate on them well; you should love them with all your heart.
>
> (Verses 40–45)

Such self-examination and self-discipline lead to the blessed after-life promised at the end of these verses. It's a coherent text, probably not by Pythagoras himself, nor constrained by the norms that so powerfully shaped early Greek maxims. Yet, these golden words proved capable of enduring long after books ascribed to Pythagoras were lost and the maxims of the Seven Sages were known only in excerpts.

DEMOPHILUS

AMONG THOSE influenced by the Pythagoreans the otherwise unknown Demophilus steps from the shadows with two sets

of maxim-like sayings in hand. His dates cannot be precisely determined, but since one of his works is dedicated to a person named Asclepiades, it seems safe to place him in the Hellenistic or Roman period when this name and the practice of literary dedications were popular. His Similitudes pay respect to the tradition of maxim-coining that reaches back to the Seven Sages, but these fifty-nine Similitudes show little respect for the old demand for succinctness. They also turn on its head the tacit rule that maxims should avoid figures of speech, not least similes. The result is that the Similitudes are often several lines in length, always with room for a comparison to runners in the stadium, fair weather sailors, charioteers, the setting sun or the like. They are, again, mini-sermons, though without much theology.

Demophilus's other work, forty five Pythagorean Sentences (i.e., *sententiae*), is more explicitly theological, yet it never mentions the Olympian gods or other figures of Greek myth. Instead it focuses attention on "the divine," or on an abstract and unspecified deity, as in this surprising comment about how to pray:

> The wise man being sent hither naked, should naked invoke him by whom he was sent.

The injunction resembles the Pythagorean *symbola*, puzzling, even shocking and in need of explanation, which is immediately supplied. Clothing, after all, is merely external, not part of the inner self:

> for he alone is heard by the divinity who is not burdened with external concerns.
>
> (no. 8, tr. W. Bridgman, modified)

Maxims seem to have flourished among those influenced by Pythagoras, proving doubly useful. The *symbola* helped develop the cast of mind necessary to become a full participant in the community; the *Golden Verses* and Demophilus's adages provided a way by which outsiders could come to un-

derstand Pythagoras's ethical teachings. They did not try to summarize or promulgate Pythagorean doctrines about the transmigration of souls, purity, harmony, mathematics, and their views about the kosmos—topics we usually take to be the core of Pythagorean thought. These required more extensive and complex presentations, but even when philosophical treatises and dialogues had come to be well-developed forms of philosophical thought, the humble maxim did not lose its appeal. There was constant demand for succinct answers to the question, how can I lead a better life. Maxims provided answers to that question, and not only among the Pythagoreans, as becomes clear in those ascribed to the philosopher Democritus and another writer of similar name.

DEMOCRITUS OR DEMOCRATES?

A LARGE AND WIDE-RANGING GROUP of maxims has been gathered together under the name Democritus of Abdera, the philosopher who flourished in the late fifth and early forth century BCE. (These are accessible in the standard collection of fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers (DK 68B.35–115)). While they may contribute to the understanding of the philosopher, some of them may have been mistakenly attributed to him. That possibility arises since a collection of maxims in a manuscript in the Palatine library contains "golden maxims" attributed to one Democrates. Since some of these maxims resemble ones elsewhere ascribed to the philosopher Democritus, some scholars have assumed that the name Democrates in the Palatine manuscript is a mistake for Democritus, and merged these maxims with others ascribed to this philosopher. These scholars draw support from the Anthology of Stobaeus which included maxims similar to those in the Palatine manuscript but ascribed some of them to Democritus. This, however, may have been a blunder on Stobaeus's part, assigning work by a less well known Democrates to the big name Philosopher. Alternatively, the

maxims of two writers may have overlapped in content, as sometimes happens in collections of maxims.

Although this is not an easy problem to untangle, it is safest to begin by separating those maxims ascribed to Democrates from those that bear Democritus's name. When one does that, Democrates speaks in his own voice. It is not a mere echo of Democritus but sometimes expresses thoughts or explores themes and ideas not found in Democritus. It is best to start, then, with the maxims securely attributed to Democritus; after that one is prepared to recognize what is distinctive in those ascribed to Democrates.

DEMOCRITUS'S *GNŌMAI*

THE MAXIMS ascribed to Democritus do not fit smoothly into conventional views of the philosopher, famed as the precursor of modern atomic theory. In one respect this is not surprising: while maxims were well-attuned to the fast-moving thought patterns of early Greek thinkers, Democritus's ideas about the physical world were complex and demanded extended presentation, so much so that one wonders how maxims could be of any use to him.

The answer, I believe, is that Democritus was, as Diogenes Laertius (9.37) put it, "a pentathlete among philosophers," that is, someone of wide-ranging interests and ideas. Diogenes' assessment is corroborated by the dazzling list of works he extracted from Thrasyllus (DL 9.46–49). These include, to be sure, many works on the physical world, but also some on ethics, notably one called *Aretē* or *On Andragathia*. While it is easy to imagine this work as a collection of short sayings on the theme of virtue, one after the other in the familiar way, one fragment suggests something quite different. Thus, the saying "For human beings good spirits (*euthymiē*) result from restraint of pleasure" (DK 68B, 191) sounds at first like a succinct, free-standing maxim of the traditional sort. It begins, however with the particle *gar*, for, a clear indi-

cation that it is part of a longer argument. The passage then continues for almost two dozen lines, developing a complex and sophisticated argument. In such a setting the maxim is the eye-catcher, for a more expansive thought process.

Many maxims ascribed to Democritus (DK 68B, 169–297) are, to be sure, quite brief, but they may also have been culled from more extensive expositions. If so, the maxim may have entered into a new phase, in which they ally with presentations of complex ideas, expository prose providing evidence and argumentation, while maxims summarize and drive the point home. That alliance was a breakthrough, drawing together two hitherto sharply differentiated forms of expression. Democritus saw, I believe, that maxims and discursive argument could go hand in hand. They seem to belong together, each supporting the insights of the other.

Underlying Democritus's maxims, and perhaps much of his ethical thought, is once again *gnōmē*. He was keenly aware of the difficulties encountered if it were neglected or rejected. His thinking on this matter is most powerfully expressed in a fragment discussing the role of the gods in human affairs:

> The gods give all good things to humans, both in ancient times and now. But as for whatever is evil, injurious or profitless, these the gods do not bestow on humans either in ancient times or now; rather humans bring these things upon themselves through their mental blindness and want of thoughtfulness.
>
> (DK 68B, 175, translation adapted from Richard McKim)

The word here translated "want of thoughtfulness" is an old friend, *agnōmosynē*, the term Theognis used in telling Cyrnus, "Nothing better than *gnōmē* does a man have for himself, and nothing more grievous than *agnōmosynē*" (896). It is the reverse of the quality Solon so highly valued, *gnōmosynē*.

There is no comparable concern about *agnōmosynē* in the maxims ascribed to Democrates, nor apparently any similar fusion of maxims with discursive reasoning. In fact,

Democrates seems to move in the opposite direction, integrating his maxims around a common theme.

THE GOLDEN MAXIMS OF DEMOCRATES

DEMOCRATES is a perfectly good Greek name. No need, then, to emend it when it appears in manuscripts. In fact, it is such a common name that it is provides little help in identifying or dating the author of these *Golden Maxims*. Still, some scholars have pointed to the Athenian orator of that name (RE 12), a generation younger than the philosopher, as its author. Orators, after all, knew how important it was to make effective use of maxims.

Democrates, however, saw the importance of maxims in very specific terms, to judge from one of his sayings:

> If someone applies himself with intelligence to these gnōmai of mine, he will accomplish great deeds worthy of a man tried and true (*anēr agathos*), but will avoid doing many pointless things.
>
> (DK 68B, 35)

This is an introduction to a series of maxims rather than a maxim itself. It explains to readers why they should read on and what to expect when they do. Democrates' maxims, it implies, will not be a string of unrelated sayings, but a coherent series of steps toward the goal of becoming an *anēr agathos*, that is, attaining the robust virtue called *andragathia*. Democritus, too, focused on this quality, as we have seen, but Democrates makes a bold claim about it, unparalleled in form and substance among collections of maxims examined up to this point. The approach to this virtue is bold as well, for it emphasizes not wise actions alone, but the intention behind them:

> An esteemed man differs from one not esteemed not only by his action, but from what he wills.
>
> (DK 68B, 68)

Virtue, that is, depends on will or intention. Other maxims of Democrates (e.g., B89 and, with different phraseology, B 62) drive the point home. In general, moreover, the maxims of Democrates reflect an interest not in the external world but in the soul and mind of human beings. That interest shapes the themes of these maxims and provides synergy among them.

A SEA CHANGE

THERE'S BEEN a sea change, but not the one we might have expected. Early maxims often hop, skip and jump from one topic to another, untroubled by thoughts of sequential or thematic unity. Flashes of insight or cleverness were what mattered. As discursive reasoning became more prominent among the Greeks and as treatises and other works of expository prose flourished, maxims might have faded away. Not at all! Over the centuries, they continued to brighten works in both prose and poetry. Having navigated the passage from a primarily oral culture to one that relied on writing to express ideas, knowledge and emotions, maxims found ways to prove their value to philosophers, religious leaders, poets and orators. To do so, they had to adapt to new circumstances, yet, even under pressure to expand for clarity or elegance, they maintained much of their lean and abstract quality. Instead of fading away they proliferated. The numbers tell the story.

THE NUMBERS

A FEW INSTANCES: *The Hippocratic Precepts* begins with "Life is Short; the Art is Long," and continues with over four hundred similar pronouncements, all focused on the distinctive ways by which followers of Hippocrates practiced medicine. It is more difficult to count the maxims in Isocrates, so frequent and interwoven are they in his speeches and letters,

but even a sample, such as his speech to Demonicus (esp. 1.16f.) shows dozens of them.

Under the name of Menander survives a collection of 866 maxims called *Monostichoi*, or "one liners"—not jokes but edifying sayings that fit in a single line (or two) of verse. Menander's near contemporary, the philosopher Epicurus left extensive expositions of his doctrines but also expressed himself in a series of forty *Valid Opinions* (*Kyriai Doxai*) (DL 10.138–54). These are remarkable in their ability to make complex ideas accessible to laypeople. In addition a manuscript in the Vatican library contains about eighty Epicurean adages, some a half-dozen words in length, others a half page long. Writer after writer seems presciently to have anticipated the advice at the end of Epictetus's *Encheiridion*, "Upon all occasions we ought to have these maxims ready at hand." The tragedians, especially Euripides, rhetoricians, not least Aristotle in his *Rhetoric*, and philosophers, notably Pyrrho, made extensive use of the form. A Hellenized Jew composed about 250 maxims in hexameters and ascribed them to the gnomic poet Phocylides. The list of maxim writers goes on; its sheer quantity is enough to show that this often neglected mini-genre had a central place among ancient Greek modes of thought and expression.

The numbers keep accumulating in Rome and beyond. Among the Romans the form of the early Greek maxim was often replicated, imperatives of two or three words: *Cave Canem*. *Carpe Diem*. *Memento Mori*. Sometimes a Greek antecedent of a Latin maxim can be detected: *Divide et Impera*, which served Julius Caesar so well, may be the Latin version of a maxim of Philip II of Macedon. Another Greek adage, Make Haste Slowly, turned into the Latin *Festina Lente*, helped shape the strategy of Caesar's crafty successor, the emperor Augustus.

Having crossed the Adriatic, the maxim eventually crossed the Rubicon as well and made its way into northern Europe, flourishing amid the revival of classical learning, not least

through Erasmus's lifelong gathering of proverbs, clever sayings and maxims in successive versions of his *Adages*. In France, Montaigne's essays and the *Maximes* of François de La Rochefoucauld allowed the maxim ever greater scale and scope. In 18th century Königsberg, in Prussia, Immanuel Kant formulated his Categorical Imperative in terms of maxims: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim become a universal law," he wrote in his *Critique of Pure Reason*.

They crossed the Channel, delighting Polonius and his ilk, and soon enough the Atlantic. They seem to have no respect for boundaries, geographical or chronological. Their vitality seems irrepressible, but how is it to be explained?

UNMASKING THE MAXIM

THE ANSWER, I believe, is simple, but may seem counterintuitive; maxims empower. On the surface they may seem either a platitude or a scolding, as when Isocrates tells young Demonicus, "Fear the Gods, Honor your Parents, Respect your Friends, Obey the Law" (1.16). Just below the surface, however, are other implicit messages. One is Focus, in Demonicus's case, on social virtues rather than on power, prestige or purely personal virtues. In a complex and conflicted world, ancient or modern, such focusing can bring welcome relief—clarity for the mind and strength for the will. Maxims look you straight in the eye and go straight to the heart of the matter. leaving no room" for hemming or hawing, or for shillyshallying of any sort. "Get on with it," they say. "Strike While The Iron Is Hot."

This is empowering, but so is a second feature of many Greek maxims. When they command, they also reassure. On the surface, their injunction may seem beyond attainment, but implicitly the maxim says, Yes You Can. Every maxim contains an implicit promise. Even in the most difficult of all injunctions, Know Yourself, the underlying message is clear:

"Self-knowledge is attainable. Get to work on it. Difficulty is no excuse."

Greek maxims guide the individual listener from hesitation to confidence, and from procrastination to action. That accounts for much of their vitality. To be sure, no maxim says this in so many words. They like to masquerade, playfully encouraging whoever encounters one to think that real meaning is all on the surface—as if a single glance reveals all one needs to know. But stop for a few seconds, strip off the mask, and hidden meanings appear. The messages below the surface provide focus and confidence to the attentive listener and gave maxims the ability to climb mountains and cross oceans.

Yet, under some circumstances, maxims for all their vitality have an unexpected vulnerability. That has become clear in recent days.

ATTACKING THE CAPITOL

MAXIMS and their close relatives flourished in the new land; Americans liked being reminded not to change horses in mid-stream and seemed willing to Live and Let Live, at least some of the time. They adapted their rustic manners along the lines of the 110 "Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour" which George Washington compiled in his early 'teens (e.g., "Spit not in the fire"). Perennially popular has been Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* with its folk wisdom, rhymes and occasional echo of its Greek antecedents ("There are three things extremely hard, steel, a diamond, and to know one's self"). Maxims had a vigorous role in American education, political discourse and everyday life well into the second half of the nineteenth century, and despite the scorn of elites refused to disappear, though often blurring with other speech forms—slogans, rallying cries and commercial jingles:

> See the USA
> in your Chevrolet,
> America is asking you to call.
> See the USA
> In your Chevrolet,
> America's the greatest land of all.

Innocent enough, but somehow, somewhere along the way, something went wrong. What was it? Was it the tendency of maxims to morph into slogans, and slogans into war cries? At first such changes seemed inconsequential. The revival of America First as a political slogan followed by Make America Great Again seemed at first more banal than harmful. Lock Her Up was worse, but everyone knew Hilary Clinton was not about to be incarcerated. Then across social media spread the counterfactual Stop the Steal, but it too seemed to pose no clear and present danger—at first.

Then came January 6, 2021, when an angry mob ransacked the Capitol of the United States, their violence accompanied by shouts: USA!, USA!, USA! The venerable three-word imperative took on new force: Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence! Hang Mike Pence! In the crowd was every conceivable depravity of language from QAnon's Save the Children (sc., from Deep State pedophiles) to Intactivists' Outlaw Satan's Circumcision. In the midst of the mob was a sign in Greek, ΜΟΛΩΝ ΛΑΒΕ, *Come and Get It*, straight out of Plutarch, as if the insurrectionists were valiant Spartans prepared to fight to the death against invading Persians. And after this mob had ransacked the Capitol, any critic of the outrage, even a former Republican presidential nominee, could find "Traitor" spewed into his face. None of these was a true maxim, though the rioters often appropriated the form of maxims, sucked the soul of reason and decency from it, then filled it with hatred, fury and vitriol.

Analysts of American politics will be the ones who have to explain what went wrong. Classicists can only point to the problem and insist that any society, large or small, ancient or

modern, depends on the health of its civic discourse. Greek maxims could be banal, obscure, clichéd or just plain silly. Their advice was not always wise or beneficial. But, as best I can see, Greek maxims never spewed hatred. Whatever their flaws, they did not corrode political discourse, leaving the citizenry vulnerable to the most vicious among them.

It was not always this way. It does not have to be this way.

Enough is Enough. A Word to the Wise is Sufficient.

NOTE

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This essay is dedicated to the memory of my teacher, Herbert S. Long.