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# Victimhood casts shadow on the virtue of valour

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This Sunday, on Anzac Day, we will remember those who gave their lives for this country, most recently in Afghanistan, and honour their bravery and devotion. Yet in a culture that places victimhood on a pedestal, the future of the values which shape that tradition of service seems increasingly uncertain.

Those values are among Western civilisation's oldest components. Forged in the internecine conflicts between the fiercely independent Greek city-states, the notions of valour that we have inherited received an enduring formulation some 2800 years ago in Homer's great protagonists, ranging from Achilles and Ajax to Hector and Aeneas.

Homer's heroes were earthly incarnations of the Greek gods: riven by passions, they could neither tolerate being slighted nor accept being bested. But although they shared the gods' strengths and weaknesses, they possessed one virtue the gods were denied — courage.

After all, courage required the ability to face death, which the immortal gods would never experience. As a result, while the gift of bravery was dispensed by the gods, making some mortals courageous from birth and others fearful, the gods themselves could not savour its joys or suffer its sorrows.

That is not to suggest that the Homeric heroes were entirely admirable. Always striving for personal glory, they lived on the edge of hubris, at times recklessly endangering their

comrades as they sought the one-on-one battles that would earn them undying fame.

Even in classical Greece, this model of courage was therefore challenged by another, which emerged when the individualistic ethos of the Homeric battlefield gave way to clashes between serried phalanxes of hoplites. Those phalanxes' fighting efficacy depended on the assurance that as a phalanx's frontlines were mowed down, the ranks immediately behind them would move fearlessly forward to take their place.

With that imperative reshaping the nature of combat, a new conception of courage developed which stressed the importance of self-discipline. Articulated most cogently by Plato, this new conception made excellence not a matter of force but of mental strength: "sophrosune", "the undivided mastery of oneself", acquired through rigorous training rather than by divine gift, was elevated into the greatest of virtues, because "victory over oneself is the most glorious of victories, while defeat by the weaknesses that lurk (in one's own soul) is the most ignominious of defeats".

It was this view of courage — based on "egkrateia" (self-control) and "karteria" (perseverance) — which was adopted by the Romans. Most importantly, the Stoics, writing in the first three centuries of our era, added to Plato's definition of valour — as unstinting discipline in the presence of danger — the notion of loyal service for, and duty to, the state, thus framing a crucial part of our contemporary conception.

Meanwhile, having been brushed aside by the Stoics, the Homeric image of the individual hero — who overrode all fear to accomplish magnificent deeds — was viewed with suspicion by the Christians (who nonetheless made fortitude one of the four cardinal virtues), and derided in the Enlightenment, which regarded the passion with which it was associated as a threat to a calm and orderly commercial society.

Scottish philosopher David Hume, for example, considered the bravery of Homer's heroes to be vainglory, declaring that while "'heroism is much admir'd by the generality of mankind", "men of cool reflexion" were "more inclin'd to hate than admire the ambition of heroes".

But despite all the criticisms of the Homeric ideal, respect for exceptional valour hardly

disappeared. Exalted by the Humanists of the Renaissance, and then given a central role in 19th century romanticism, the awe inspired by Aristotle's "great-souled man" — who "while not loving danger, will face danger in a great cause, and will be ready to sacrifice his life, because he holds that life is not worth having at any price" — proved inextinguishable.

The conception of bravery which ultimately prevailed was therefore one in which both Platonic self-discipline and the daring of the Aristotelean "great soul" found their place.

Yet already in 1961, the American historian Daniel Boorstin, in a remarkably perceptive book called The Image, highlighted trends that threatened the admiration valour had long received.

The values of sacrifice and self-control, he noted, sat uncomfortably with a zeitgeist whose dominant currents were emotionalism and immediate gratification — and the discipline of hierarchies and of command even more so.

At the same time, wrote Boorstin, an "Age of Contrivance" had dawned, in which "the celebrity" — famously defined by Boorstin as "a person well-known for being well-known" — was displacing the traditional hero, who, like "all older forms of greatness", could survive only in "this new form's shadow".

But this new form of eminence, built on the "pseudo-heroes of pseudo-events", was inherently vacuous; and as that emptiness became apparent, "our discontent (would) begin by finding false villains whom we can accuse of deceiving us", before "finding false heroes whom we expect to liberate us".

Who would these "false heroes" be? In a parody of the ancient martyrs they, too, would turn out to be celebrities, but of self-proclaimed pain and pathos. Instead of being admired for what they had done, they would be admired for what had been done to them. With victimhood, rather than achievement, becoming the governing ideal, the "vigorous virtues", as Shirley Robin Letwin termed them — of being "upright, self-sufficient, energetic, adventurous, independent minded, loyal to friends and robust against foes" — would increasingly grate against the grain of the times.

There are, no doubt, some who welcome those virtues' erosion — as was highlighted by the schadenfreude, and appalling rush to judgment, which greeted the Brereton Report. But while there is unquestionable truth in Thucydides' warning that "war, filching away the easy provision of the everyday, is a violent teacher", providing a breeding ground for inexcusable crimes, the grim reality is that the threats we face are mounting by the day.

As retreat from Afghanistan looms, it is therefore fair to ask whether this absurdistan of a culture that now surrounds us could, in an increasingly dangerous world, ever match the bravery and endurance of the tens of thousands of young Australians whose sacrifice Anzac Day commemorates.

Theirs was not the culture of complaint but of courage and honour. From the fields of the Somme to the jungles of New Guinea, their names stare out at us, characters etched on row after row of gravestones whose unadorned simplicity is as poignant today as when they were first laid. In reaffirming the values for which they gave their lives, we can do no better than to say, with Yeats:

"May those characters remain

When all is ruin once again."