

Values in Pindar

Pindar was composing his poetry at the start of the fifth century B.C. at a similar time to Aeschylus, and as much as three centuries after the completion of Homer's works. The values he displays, however, do not seem to have developed since the time of Homer; Pindar's ethics are those of a shame-culture, and in this way thoroughly Homeric. They are aristocratic, favouring the strong, powerful ruler over the weak and dominated. Wealth and prosperity are praised, not frowned upon. Nietzsche approved of Pindar's praise of the strong, be they tyrants or athletes (or indeed both), and conversely disapproved of the way Socrates later denied the good to be had in strength and power. There was no prize for second place; a man's victory was the result of his own efforts and divine fortune – and if a man did not win, it was because he was deficient in one of these things, and was not, therefore, deserving of praise. Pindar was highly religious, however, and was keenly aware of the gulf between man and god: although he was happy to place the victor at the pinnacle of human achievement, this is where the praise stops. Deification is not something encouraged by Pindar.

Pindar's views on aristocracy can be seen clearly in his poems. Take *Olympian* 1.113-4,

/πᾶ ἄλλοισι δὲ ἄλλοι μέγαλοι. τί δὲ φσζατον
κορυφοῦται βασιλεῖσι. μηκῦτι πιπταινε πῆρσιον.¹

Power and wealth are praiseworthy. Wealth for its own sake is not, however. A rich man must use his wealth well in order to appear good. In *Pythian* 1.90 Pindar advises those who wish to be thought of in good repute to make full use of their wealth:

$\varepsilon\theta\pi\epsilon\rho\ \tau\iota\ \phi\iota\lambda\epsilon\iota\omega\ \square\kappa\omicron\square\ \square\delta\epsilon\iota\lambda\alpha\nu\ \alpha\Rightarrow\varepsilon\Leftarrow\ \kappa\lambda\gamma\iota\nu,\ \mu\downarrow\ \kappa\square\mu\nu\epsilon\ \lambda\Leftarrow\alpha\nu\ \delta\alpha\pi\square\nu\alpha\iota\omega^2$

And later at line 92 he reproaches those who make money without spending it:

$$\mu \downarrow \delta \omega \lambda \psi \approx \omega, \in \phi \Leftrightarrow \lambda \omega, \kappa \Upsilon \rho \delta \epsilon \sigma \iota \nu \varepsilon \lceil \tau \rho \square \pi \lambda \iota \omega \rceil^3$$

Pindar sees wealth as a gift that should not be admired and praised, but that, if used badly, can be the cause of misfortune. Furthermore, the joy that comes from victory and success surpasses wealth:

J δ' καλῶν τι νῦν λαξῶν
 □βρ)τατω f πι με□λαω
 /φ/λπ⇔δω πΥταται
 |ποπτΥροιω □νορΥαιω, $fξ$ πν
 κρΥσσονα πλο(του μΥριμναν.⁴

Pindar states that there is a something “greater than wealth”, a glory that surpasses all things material. Honour in Homer is represented in a concrete manner through material prizes, but for Pindar the wealth that comes from victory is not itself the source of joy: the joy is external. Furthermore, while Pindar does not scorn wealth and the aristocracy, he does see greed and over-ambition in a highly negative light. Tantalus was greatly honoured by the gods:

$\varepsilon \Rightarrow \delta' \delta \rightarrow \text{τιν}\varepsilon \square \nu \delta \rho \alpha \psi \nu \alpha \tau \iota \varsigma \nu \square \text{Ολ}(\mu \rho \upsilon \sigma \kappa \omicron \rho \omicron \Leftarrow$
 $/\tau \Leftrightarrow \mu \alpha \varsigma \alpha \nu, \bullet \nu \text{T} \square \nu \tau \alpha \lambda \omicron \omega \omicron \square \tau \omega^5$

¹ Some men are great in one thing, others in another; but the peak of the farthest limit is for kings. Do not look further than that

² And if you are fond of always hearing sweet things spoken of you, do not be too distressed by expenses

³ Do not be deceived, my friend, by glib profit-seeking.

⁴ But he who has gained some fine new thing in his great opulence flies beyond hope on the wings of his manliness, with ambitions that are greater than wealth.

⁵ If indeed the watchers of Olympus ever honoured a mortal man, that man was Tantalus.

However, he was not satisfied with his $\mu\gamma\gamma\alpha\nu\lambda\beta\omicron\nu$, and was overpowered by greed, stealing from the gods the means necessary for immortality, nectar and ambrosia, and giving them to his drinking companions – and for this he was punished. The result of his greed is suffering: $\xi\epsilon\iota\delta\epsilon\pi\lambda\alpha\mu\omicron\nu\beta\epsilon\omega\nu\tau\omicron\lambda\tau\omicron\nu\mu\pi\epsilon\delta\mu\omicron\zeta\psi\omicron\nu$. What we see here is one of Pindar's core moral messages – there is a definite limit to how far man should go and strive for in life, and if he tries to surpass this, entering the realm of the divine, he will be displaying $\beta\rho\iota\omega$ and will be punished. Pindar was a very religious and god-fearing man, and had a genuine and firm belief that man will be punished for excess and arrogance.

Indeed, arrogance seems to be man's vice most condemned by the poet. In *Olympian* 7.90 Pindar praises Diagoras because "he walks a straight course on a road that hates arrogance"; in *Pythian* 8 Peace sinks "Arrogance in the flood"; in *Pythian* 1 we see Pindar criticising the arrogance of the Carthaginians and Etruscans, which "brings lamentation to their ships off Cumae". $\beta\rho\iota\omega$ is perhaps the fault with which man does himself the most harm in Greek literature. Aristotle in his *Poetics* said that it was the primary cause of tragic heroes' downfalls. It is a important concept in Homer too: Achilles argues with Agamemnon in *Iliad* 1 because he sees the man as 'hubristic'. Two famous Greek maxims, "know thyself" and "nothing in excess" would both be endorsed by Pindar. The need for self-limitation is one that we see in both shame and guilt cultures, and therefore Pindar shares this value with Homer and Aeschylus, whose values are arguably those of a shame culture, and Sophocles and Euripides, in whose plays we see more of a guilt culture.

So far we have looked at Pindar's values in terms of man and his relationship with the divine and respect towards it; what then, of values on a purely human level? First we can consider the values of the athlete – the "athletic ideal" as Bowra calls it.⁶ Pindar saw in athletes the pinnacle of humanity: they possessed $\pi\rho\epsilon\tau\rightarrow$ in the fullest sense. He was not, unlike Bacchylides, so much interested in the games in terms of what actually happened; moreover what concerned him was the glory that came from winning and what was required in order to win.

Victory in the games comes from three causes. First, a man must have natural talent: his nature, or $\phi\upsilon\alpha$. This may come differently to different men, but they must make use of what they have. At *Nemean* 1.25 he says, "A man must walk by straight ways / And fight by his own blood." Pindar thinks that success runs in the genes, saying for example in *Pythian* 8 $\pi\alpha\lambda\alpha\iota\sigma\mu\pi\tau\epsilon\sigma\sigma\iota\gamma\pi\rho\Rightarrow\xi\nu\epsilon\tau\omega\nu\mu\alpha\tau\rho\alpha\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\epsilon\omega\omega$ ⁷. Secondly, success comes from toil and effort, $\pi\nu\omega\omega$, and Pindar scorns a man who thinks otherwise:

$\epsilon\Rightarrow\gamma\pi\rho\tau\omega\sigma\lambda\pi\gamma\pi\alpha\tau\alpha\iota\mu\downarrow\sigma\downarrow\nu\mu\alpha\kappa\rho\pi\nu\omega$,
 $\pi\omicron\lambda\lambda\omicron\sigma\tau\omega\sigma\phi\sigma\delta\omicron\kappa\epsilon\uparrow\pi\epsilon\delta\delta\pi\phi\rho\nu\omega\nu$
 $\beta\epsilon\omega\nu\kappa\omicron\rho\nu\sigma\sigma\gamma\mu\epsilon\nu\downarrow\rho\psi\omicron\beta\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota\sigma\iota\mu\alpha\zeta\alpha\nu\alpha\uparrow\omega$ ⁸

Physical effort in training and in the contest itself is of the utmost importance, but so too is intelligence. The third cause of success is that which is beyond man's control, the divine. It is often the case that victory or loss occurs because of divine involvement. Often Pindar, like Homer, is unspecific as to whether a particular god or some $\delta\alpha\epsilon\mu\omega\nu$ is involved, but he never attributes victory to sheer luck, an alien concept to the poet.

The final question which is of great importance to the topic is that of $\phi\psi\nu\omega\omega$, envy. This can come from men as well as gods, and Pindar is careful not to praise his victors in such a way that he might appear to be deifying them; while he does not seek to incite envy in any form, it is divine envy which must be prevented at all costs, for it is this which will result in retribution. Note *Pythian* 10.20-21: "Let the gods not envy them and change their fortune." There was a school of

⁶ C. M. Bowra, *Pindar* chp. IV.

⁷ For in wrestling you follow in the footsteps of your mother's brothers.

⁸ P. 8. 73-5: For many suppose that he who has won good things with no long stretch of toil is the wise man among fools and marshals his life with plans of unerring judgement.

thought at the time of Pindar, says Bowra, that the object of $\phi\psi\upsilon\omega\omega$ – the man who incited envy for his athletic success – shared as much guilt as the man who felt the envy. Perhaps this is because feeling envy is something which man has no control over, whereas winning is something he does. Indeed, there is an extract in Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* in which Pythagoras advises his friend Eurymenes to compete in the Olympian Games, but not to win. Winning was said to have corrupted man's character: {rcYj ka, cgemon·aj 3meroj ka, filoneik·ai doxomane¹j katTMcousi, a quote found in the same *Life of Pythagoras*. Pindar saw envy as perhaps an inevitable side-effect of success, but thought that envy was preferable to pity. He says in *Pythian* 1.85: $\square\lambda\lambda\acute{\epsilon}\ \mu\omega, \kappa\rho\Upsilon\sigma\sigma\omega\nu\ \gamma\Box\rho\ \sigma\Rightarrow\kappa\tau\iota\rho\mu\omicron\ \phi\psi\upsilon\omega\omega, / \mu\downarrow\ \pi\alpha\rho\Leftarrow\epsilon\iota\ \kappa\alpha\lambda\Box$. This point not only shows us his views on pity, it is also an example of values indicative of shame-culture. Pity and envy are feelings held by others, and Pindar thinks in terms of such feelings. What is important to the poet was what others felt of the victor, not how the victor himself felt.

The values in Pindar's poetry are archaic; they are those of a shame-culture, in which man acts not from motives within – guilt and the desire to do what is right – but judging his successes and failures from how other people see them. A useful example comes in *Pythian* 8.

τΥτρασι δᾶ fμπετεω|χ)ψεν
 σωμ□τεσσι κακ□ φρονΥων,
 το||ω ο_τε ν)στοω J μω
 fπαλπνοω/ν Πυψι□δι κρ⇐ψη,
 ο|δ' μολ)ντων π□ρ ματΥρᾶ □μφ⇐ γΥλπω γλυκ|ω
 ερσεν ξ□ριν: κατ□ λα(ραω δᾶ/ξψρρν □π□οροι
 πτΘσσουντι, συμφορ□ δεδαγμΥνοι.⁹

The feelings of shame, rather than those of personal failure, are what “bite” the losers.

This distinction between shame and guilty-cultures is applicable in a non-divine aspect. In terms of man's relationship with gods Pindar shares the beliefs of those before and those after him, for these beliefs are palpably clear: do not be greedy, do not strive to be more than you are, “nothing in excess”. The moral message that pervades Greek tragedy is that man should live with due measure, and this indeed is the one what pervades Pindar.

⁹ And now four times you came down with bodies beneath you,
 – You meant them harm –
 To whom the Pythian feast has given
 No glad home-coming like yours.
 They, when they meet their mothers,
 Have no sweet laughter around them, moving delight.
 In back streets, out of their enemies' way,
 They cower; for disaster has bitten them.