

Chapter 1

Humans and beasts: understanding ourselves

Medea's revenge

Medea, daughter of the King of Colchis, has betrayed her country and family out of love for the Greek adventurer Jason, who has brought her back to Greece. Now they have fallen on hard times, and to mend his fortunes Jason has left Medea and their two sons and is to marry the daughter of the King of Corinth. He does not understand the depth of her outrage; her sacrifice and devotion mean little to him. Medea realizes that there is only one way to bring home to Jason what he has done, what kind of commitment he has discounted. The only way to hurt him as much as he has hurt her is to kill their sons, depriving him of any descendants and leaving his life empty. But can she do this? They are her children too.

In Euripides' famous play, produced at Athens in the fifth century BC, Medea resolves to kill her sons, then goes back on her resolve when she sees them. Sending them away, she steels herself to do the deed, and speaks words which were to become famous:

I know that what I am about to do is bad, but anger is master of my plans,
which is the source of the greatest troubles for humankind.

She recognizes two things going on in her: her plans and her anger or *thumos*. She also recognizes that her anger is 'master of' the plans she has rationally deliberated on carrying out.

What is going on here? We may think that nothing is going on that a philosopher needs to concern herself with; we simply have something which happens every day, though usually not in such spectacular ways. I think it better for me to do A than B, but am led by anger, or some other emotion, to do B instead.

But how do we understand what is going on? How can I genuinely think that A is the better thing to do, if I end up doing B? How can anger, or any other emotion or feeling, get someone to go against what they have deliberately resolved on doing? Until we have some systematic way of understanding this, we and the way we act are mysterious to ourselves. Many people, of course, do remain this way, with many of the sources of their actions and their patterns of behaviour opaque to themselves. But the society in which Euripides' play was produced and continued to be a classic fostered a kind of thinking, the kind we call philosophical thinking. This kind of reflective, probing thinking regarded Medea's situation as calling for explanation and understanding in terms that they, and we so many years later, can readily recognize as philosophical.

As already indicated, the question of what, if anything, distinguishes ancient philosophy and its methods will emerge by the end of the book; here we will focus on an issue where we can readily understand what ancient philosophers are doing.

The Stoics: the soul as a unity

Are there really two distinct things operating in Medea, her plans and her furious anger? How do they relate to Medea herself, who is so lucidly aware of what is going on? One school of ancient philosophers, the Stoics, developed a distinctive view of Medea as part of their ethics and psychology. They think that the idea that there are really two distinct forces or motives at work in Medea is an illusion. What matters in this situation is always *Medea* herself, the person, and it is wrong to think in terms of different parts of her. After all, she is quite clear about how her

Stoicism is a philosophical school named after the Stoa Poikile or Painted Porch, a colonnaded building in Athens where the first heads of the school taught. The school was founded by Zeno of Citium, who arrived in Athens in 313 BC. After Zeno the most influential head of the school was Chrysippus of Soli (c.280–208 BC) who wrote extensively on just about every philosophical topic, and produced what became authoritative Stoic positions.

Stoicism often presented itself, particularly at first, in a deliberately harsh light, emphasizing doctrines that are so far from common sense as to be paradoxical. However, Stoicism as a philosophy is holistic – that is, its parts can be developed separately, but ultimately the aim is to understand them all in relation to the other parts. Hence Stoic ‘paradoxes’ increasingly make sense and acquire conviction as they are appreciated against the background of Stoic arguments and connected ideas. There are thus many ways of teaching Stoicism; where you begin depends on the audience’s level of interest and expertise. Epictetus, a later Stoic (AD c.50–130), taught in a way that appealed directly to his audience’s interest in ethical and social matters, and accounts of his teaching have continued to be used as a vivid introduction to Stoic thought. The universal aspect of Stoicism is illustrated by the fact that Epictetus, a former slave, was influential on the Stoic reflections of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (AD 121–180).

thoughts are going. First she resolves to do one thing, then to do another – but these are both *her* resolves, decisions that she comes to as a result of giving weight to resentment on the one hand or love on the other.

Medea as a whole veers now in one direction, now in another. How then can she come to a considered judgement as to what to do, and then act on anger which is stronger than this? What happens, the Stoics think, is that, being in an emotional state, she follows the reasons which go with

that state: she seeks revenge because that is how angry people think. But there is no real division within Medea's self. She oscillates between different decisions as a whole; there is no inner battle of parts of her. She is like the example Chrysippus used to explain emotion: a runner who is going too fast to stop, and so is out of control *as a whole*. When, therefore, she says that anger is master of her plans, what is meant is that anger is in control of them; she is reasoning, but the way she does it has been taken over by anger and achieves its aims. The angry person does not cease to reason – he doesn't act blindly – but his reasoning is in the service of anger.

The Stoics think that there are no parts or divisions to the human soul, and that it is all rational. (By the soul they mean the item that makes humans live in a characteristically human way.) Emotions are not blind, non-rational forces which can overcome rational resolve; they are themselves a kind of reason which the person determines to act on. 'It is precisely this, gratifying her anger and being revenged on her husband, that she thinks more advantageous than saving her children,' says Epictetus, a later Stoic. Blind fury could not lead to Medea's carefully planned and self-aware revenge.

But, we say, Medea could not help acting as she did; she was overcome by passion, so surely she had no real choice. No, says Epictetus; she thought she had no real alternative, but this was wrong. She could have adjusted to her loss, difficult though this would be. 'Stop wanting your husband, and nothing you want will fail to come about,' he says. Everything I do, I am responsible for; there is always something else I could have done, some other attitude I could have taken up. To say I am overcome by emotion is to evade the fact that I was the one who acted, who thought at the time that what I was doing was the right thing to do. Epictetus thinks that we should sympathize with Medea, who acted, after all, 'from a great spirit'; we can understand her reasons for revenge even when we see why she would have done better to reject them. 'She did not know where the power lies to do what we want – that this is not

to be got from outside ourselves nor by changing and rearranging things.'

The Stoic view of emotions as a kind of reason is probably unfamiliar, and tends to sound odd when first introduced. I have also plunged into the middle of things by starting with the Stoics, who belong to the period of philosophy after Aristotle, often called 'Hellenistic'. We are likely to be more familiar with the philosophical interpretation of Medea that I shall now turn to. It appears nearer to common sense and it comes from Plato, an earlier and much better-known philosopher.

Plato of Athens (427–347 BC) is the best-known ancient philosopher, largely because he was also a great writer, and produced not philosophical treatises but a number of formally self-contained dialogues, many of which are attractive reading even for non-philosophers. Writing this way is not just for literary effect; the dialogue form formally distances Plato from the views of anyone in the dialogue, and this forces the reader to think for herself what positions are being discussed, and what the upshot is, rather than accepting what is said on Plato's authority.

Plato's ideas are original, bold and wide-ranging. But in the ancient world he was influential for the form of his philosophical activity as much as for the content. There were two major Platonic traditions. Firstly, the sceptical Academy, Plato's own school, for hundreds of years – until it came to an end in the first century BC – took its task to be that of arguing against the views of others without relying on a position of one's own. Secondly, the later Platonists, beginning from the first century BC, were interested in studying Plato's own ideas in a systematic way, and in teaching and furthering them. The relationship of the later, more positive tradition to the earlier, more negative one was varied and often contested.

Plato: the soul has parts

Plato takes the phenomenon of psychological conflict, being torn between two options, to show that the person so torn is not really a unity; he is genuinely torn between the motivational pull of two or more distinct parts of the soul. Plato uses two examples. One is a person who strongly desires to drink, but reasons that he should not do so, probably because this would be bad for his health. He is, then, pulled towards taking the drink, and also, at the same time and in the same respect, pulled away from it. However, the argument goes, the same thing can't be thus affected in opposing ways at the same time, so it must be that it is not the person as a whole who is in this contradictory state, but different parts of him which do the pulling in opposite directions. When I reflect correctly, then, I can see that I don't want to drink and want not to drink; rather, part of me, which Plato calls desire, wants to drink, and another part of me, which is reason (my ability to grasp and act on reasons), is motivated to refrain.

Ancient Philosophy

Plato thinks that our psychological life is too complex to be accounted for purely in terms of reason and desire. There is a third part, called spirit or anger, and involving most of what we would call the emotions. It can conflict with desire, as Plato argues (in the fourth book of his work the *Republic*) from another case of conflict, where giving in to a pathological desire leads the person to feel angry and ashamed with himself. This emotional part is distinguished from reason, on the grounds that it is found in animals and children that don't reason; although it often endorses reason, it is essentially inarticulate and unable fully to grasp or to originate reasons.

The parts of the soul are not on a par; reason is not just a part but grasps the best interests of all the parts and hence of the person as a whole. Plato tirelessly insists that in the soul reason should rule, since it can understand its own needs and also those of the other parts, whereas the other parts are limited and short-sighted, alive only to their own needs and interests.

The real contrast, then, is between reason, articulate guardian of the interests of the whole person, and the other parts, which can't look beyond their own needs. Hence it is not very surprising that, despite Plato's long imaginative descriptions of his three-part soul, the point of the idea was seen as that of contrasting a rational with a non-rational part of me, and so as compatible with a two-part soul.

If Plato is right, then when Medea resolves that it is best to spare her children, but is then led by fury to kill them, there is a real internal division and battle going on in her. Her reason works out what is for the best, but is then overwhelmed by another part of her soul, the furious anger, which is a separate source of motivation and in this case gets her to take what her reason sees to be the worse course.

Clearly Plato will take Medea's crucial lines to be saying that her reason works out what the best course is, but that anger thereupon turns out to be a stronger force, which overwhelms reason. And this might seem to be common sense; we do often have experiences that we are tempted to describe as inner conflict, with reason or passion winning because it is stronger. It seems more common-sensical at first than the Stoic claim that anger and other emotions *are* certain kinds of reason. And yet the Stoics do better than Plato in explaining how the person carried away by fury still can act in a self-aware, complex and planned way. Medea kills her children; horrible though this is, it is a deliberate action. She doesn't run amok. Can the anger that drives her really motivate her in a way that has nothing to do with reason?

There are two distinct ways that Plato's ideas can be developed when we think about inner conflict and the problems we have in understanding what is happening in us. Both of them are found in Plato, who clearly has not seen that he has to choose between them.

What is a 'part' of the soul, like anger or other emotions? So far, we have gone with a fairly intuitive idea; there seem to be two distinct sources of

motivation within us. And we can form a fairly clear notion of the nature and function of the part which is reason. After all, we reason all the time, about the way things are or ought to be, and about what to do; and what in each case I am reasoning about is what I shall do, not what part of me shall do.

But what about the part of the soul that motivates me separately from reason? Can it be thought of as a purely irrational force? Although the language of passion fighting with and overwhelming reason might suggest this, it is hard to see how deliberate actions can be produced by something that is a completely irrational push. Surely there must be *something* in Medea's anger which is at least responsive to reason?

In many parts of his work Plato assumes that the parts of the soul are all sufficiently rational for them to communicate with and understand one another. They can all agree, in which case the person functions as an integrated whole. While the parts other than reason cannot do what reason can, namely think in terms of the person as a whole, they can still respond to what reason requires, and so understand it in a limited way. Desire, for example, can come to understand that reason forbids its satisfaction in certain circumstances, and so can come to adjust, not putting up a fight. Desire has thus been persuaded and educated by reason, rather than repressed. In terms of the whole person, when I see that some kind of action is wrong, I feel less desire to do it, and find it less difficult to refrain. Plato represents this position as one in which the soul's parts agree and are in harmony and concord. The parts other than reason have sufficient grip on what reason holds to be right that they willingly conform themselves to this, and the result is a harmonious and integrated personality.

This picture implies, though, that reason has a kind of internal hold on the other parts – it asks them, so to speak, to do things in terms that they can understand and agree to. But then won't the parts other than reason have to have a kind of reason of their own, in order to understand and go along

with what the reason part demands? And then won't all the parts have to have their own reasons? – which makes it unclear how we are supposed to have found a part of the soul which is *separate* from reason.

Suppose there were some aspect of me which were entirely non-rational and separate from reason: this would indeed look like a different part of me, but with no reason internal to it at all, it is not clear how it can listen to reason, or conform itself to what reason requires in the interests of the whole person. Such a part looks like something sub-human. And indeed we find that in some of Plato's most famous passages about the divided soul he represents the parts of the soul other than reason as non-human animals. In one passage near the end of the *Republic* he says that we all contain a little human trying to control two animals. One part, spirit, is fierce, but stable and manageable – a lion. The other part, desire, is an unpredictable monster, constantly changing shape. Clearly Plato thinks that our emotions and desires are forces within us which are in themselves subhuman, but can be trained and moulded by reason to form part of a human life – indeed, of what he thinks to be the happiest form of human life.

Humans and beasts

Another passage, in the *Phaedrus*, is even more famous. The human soul is here a chariot, with reason, the charioteer, driving two horses. One horse is biddable and can learn to obey commands, but the other is both deaf and violent, and so can be controlled only by force. In a vivid passage Plato depicts the charioteer struggling to manage sexual desire, represented by the bad horse, only with great effort; that horse threatens to get out of control and has to be yanked back, struggling all the way. It learns to refrain only through fear of punishment.

There is something plausible in this picture as a picture of ourselves; it often does seem that we are motivated by forces within us that are resistant to the reasons that we accept. But if we think systematically of some of the consequences, the picture is considerably more disturbing. If part of me is properly to be represented as an animal, then there is part of

me that is essentially less than human, and so not properly part of *me*. It becomes part of me only when subject to control by what really is me – reason. There is a kind of self-alienation at work here; part of me is regarded as being outside the self proper, because it is the kind of thing it is, and as being always potentially disobedient to my real self.

It is hard not to feel that something like this is going on when Galen, a late writer who sees himself as a Platonist, describes Medea:

She knew that she was performing an impious and terrible deed . . . But then again anger like a disobedient horse which has got the better of the charioteer dragged her by force towards the children . . . and back again reason pulled her . . . And then again anger . . . and then again reason.

Ancient Philosophy

On this view Medea's final action is the result of a battle of forces in which the stronger wins, overpowering reason by brute force. This makes it much harder to see how Medea is in fact performing a deliberate action than it is if we accept the Stoic analysis. Epictetus thinks it obvious that Medea is acting in accordance with a deliberate view of what the best thing is for her to do; the problem is that this view is corrupted and malformed by anger. Given her resentment, what she did makes perfect sense; she is not overwhelmed, her reason drowned out.

Moreover, these different ways of looking at yourself make a difference to the attitude you take to other people who act under the influence of anger. Epictetus is sympathetic to Medea. Her view of what she should do was wrong – appallingly wrong – but we can understand it, and even sympathize with it, when we reflect that it is the response of a proud and dignified individual to a betrayal which refused to recognize her worth. We should pity Medea, says Epictetus; he certainly thinks that we can understand her point of view. Galen, by contrast, regarding her as overwhelmed by the animal-like part of the soul, sees her as animal-like, and like 'barbarians and children who are spirited by nature'. Medea is 'an example of barbarians and other uncivilized people, in whom anger is

stronger than reason. With Greeks and civilized people, reason is stronger than anger.’ (No prizes for guessing that Galen sees himself as a civilized Greek.)

Plato’s view, then, is more complex than he realizes. It can lead in either of two very different directions: to seeing parts of myself as subhuman and not truly me, or it can lead to seeing them as junior partners with reason, either squabbling or making agreements. The second view is obviously much nearer to the Stoics.

Problems and theory

Plato and the Stoics see Medea in terms of very different accounts of human psychology and the emotions. So we find that the philosophical attempt to understand what is going on when we act because of emotion against our better judgement leads not to general agreement but to quite radical disagreement and to sharply conflicting conclusions. This is one reason why the example is an excellent introduction to thinking about ancient philosophy; for the tradition of philosophical thinking that developed in Greece and Rome is very often marked by strong disagreement and debate. Philosophical positions tend to be developed in dialogue and confrontation with other positions. Coming after Plato, the Stoics explicitly reject the idea of distinct parts to the soul; and Galen works out his own Platonist view in disagreeing with the Stoic view of the emotions. Philosophy in the ancient world was, with few exceptions, a way of thinking that developed in contested areas of discussion. Philosophers and their followers held, of course, that their own view was the true one, but they did not expect universal agreement; everyone was aware of the existence of rival, often equally prestigious positions.

What, then, does a philosophical explanation or theory do for us? We might think that we are no better off in understanding Medea after learning of the Stoic-Platonic dispute over the right way to interpret what is going on in her.

It is not so easy, however, to resist the search for a philosophical explanation of the phenomenon we are concerned with. I have chosen Medea as an example which was not only discussed in ancient philosophy but has continued to be a subject of lively concern in the modern world. If we look at artistic representations of the subject, or watch a performance either of Euripides' original play or of an updated version, we immediately see that a stand has to be taken on the Stoic-Platonic debate. Is Medea to be represented as overrun by passion which is overwhelming her power to reason what the best thing is for her to do? Or is she to be represented as a woman who is lucidly doing what she sees to be a terrible thing for herself as well as others, because she is not able to let go her ideals of pride and dignity?

Two nineteenth-century pictures of Medea bring out this point acutely. Eugène Delacroix's Medea is what Galen has in mind: a human overwhelmed by irrational feelings to the point of appearing radically non-human. Half-naked for no very obvious reason, her hair wild, her vision symbolically shadowed, Medea writhes with her children in a dark cave, hunted like the animal she appears to be. Frederick Sandys's Symbolist picture, on the other hand, presents Medea as quite in control of what she is doing. Surrounded by the instruments of her revenge, which is just beginning, Medea is aware of, and troubled by, choosing the perverse course, but she is presented as reasoning in a controlled and deliberate way. The picture beautifies and aestheticizes revenge in a way distancing it from the Stoics, but it is still far nearer the Stoic than Galen's Platonic view.

There is no neutral way of presenting Euripides' *Medea*: directors and actors have to make fundamental decisions as to how she is to be represented, and they will be influenced by the translation or version used. This is one reason why she has remained a key case for discussion of reason and the passions. It seems, then, that any reflection about a case like this will reveal that we need to pursue philosophical explanation.



1. Delacroix's Medea: a hunted animal



2. Sandys's Medea: deliberately choosing evil

But philosophical explanation is itself divided! How then can it advance us?

Philosophical explications of what is going on in a puzzling and difficult case may not leave us with a general consensus. (The more puzzling the case, the less likely this is to happen.) But we are driven to reflect philosophically about reason and passion for the reason already mentioned: until we try to understand what is happening, we are opaque to ourselves. If I act in anger, and reflect afterwards that I went against what I hold to be the best course, then I don't know why I acted as I did. If I accept Plato's theory, I will think of myself as internally divided, and my action as the result either of agreement between the parts of myself, or as the outcome of a battle between them (depending on whether I think of the parts other than reason as being themselves receptive to reasoning, or as non-rational, subhuman parts). If I accept the Stoic theory, I will think of myself as oscillating, as a whole, between different courses of action, motivated either by reasons of my overall good or by reasons infected by various emotions. Either way I will understand more about myself and other people.

Philosophical understanding, in the tradition of ancient philosophy, is, as we shall see, systematic, part of a large theory. Plato's idea that the soul has distinct parts is worked out in different contexts in different dialogues. In the *Timaeus*, for example, he argues that the soul's parts are actually located in different parts of the body. In the *Republic* he draws an elaborate analogy between the parts of the individual's soul and the parts of an ideal society. The Stoic theory of the emotions is part of their ethical theory, and also part of the account they give of the role of reason in human life and in the world as a whole.

Most ancient philosophers see their task as being, in general, that of understanding the world, a task which includes understanding ourselves, since we are part of the world. Aristotle is the philosopher who puts the point most memorably: humans, he says, all desire by nature 'to

understand'. The Greek word here is often translated as 'to know', but this can be misleading. What is meant is not a piling-up of known facts, but rather the achievement of understanding, something that we do when we master a field or body of knowledge and explain systematically why things are the way they are. We often begin looking for such explanations when we find things problematic, and Aristotle stresses that philosophy begins with wonder and puzzlement, and develops as we find more and more complex answers to and explanations for what were problems for us. We begin by being puzzled by the phenomenon of acting in passion against our better judgement; we understand it better when we have a theory which explains it to us in terms of a more general theory of human action. (Aristotle has his own theory on the topic, one distinctly closer to the Stoics than to Plato.)

Aristotle (384–322 BC) Plato's greatest pupil, differs from him radically in method. He is a problem-centred philosopher, beginning from puzzles which arise either in everyday thinking or in the works of previous philosophers. He has a huge range of interests, producing work on a variety of topics, from formal logic (which he invented), to biology, literary theory, politics, ethics, cosmology, rhetoric, political history, metaphysics and much more. He is a systematic thinker, using concepts such as *form* and *matter* in a variety of philosophical contexts. However, his works (we have his lecture and research notes) aspire to system rather than achieving it. Later his work was systematized in often inappropriate ways (see pp. 90–1, 93).

See the picture on p. 92.

What happens when I find that there are conflicting theories on the matter, and that holding one theory involves disagreeing with another? I am advancing further towards understanding, not retreating. For now it is clear that I have to put in some work for myself, in examining the different

theories and the reasoning behind them – for I have to work out for myself which theory is most likely to be the right one. In the present case, it is clear that the Platonic and Stoic views can't both be right. Which is? Whatever I conclude, I have to be drawn into the theories and their reasonings. If I just feel that one appeals more than the other, but cannot back this up with argument, I have given up on my original drive to understand what is going on, to get beyond feeling puzzled and find some explanation. Ancient philosophy (indeed, philosophy generally) is typically marked by a refusal to leave things opaque and puzzling, to seek to make them clearer and more transparent to reason. Hence reading ancient philosophy tends to engage the reader's reasoning immediately, to set a dialogue of minds going.

Ancient philosophy is sometimes taught as a procession of Great Figures, whose ideas the student is supposed to take in and admire. Nothing could be further from its spirit. When we open most works of ancient philosophy, we find that an argument is going on – and that we are being challenged to join in.