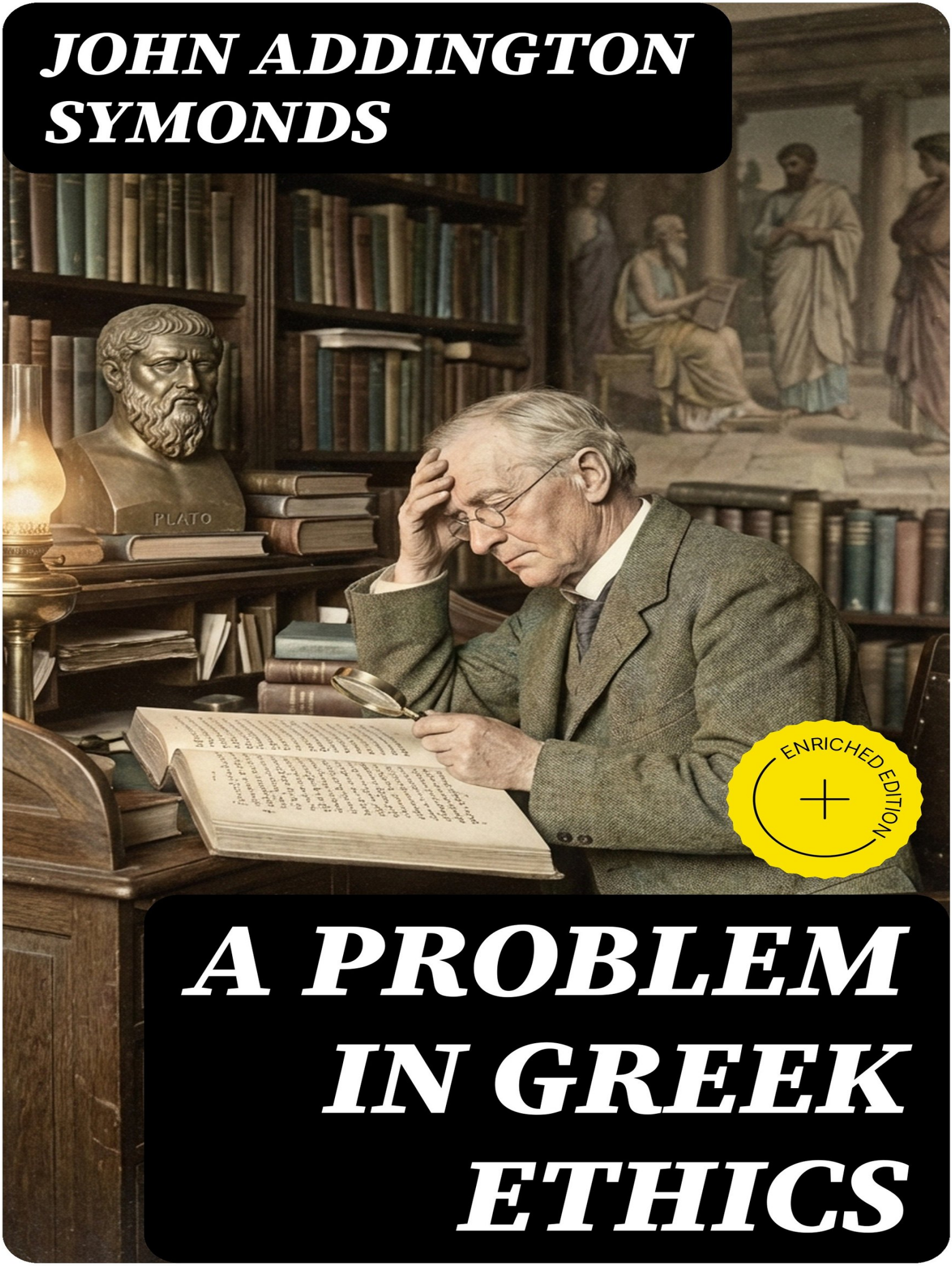
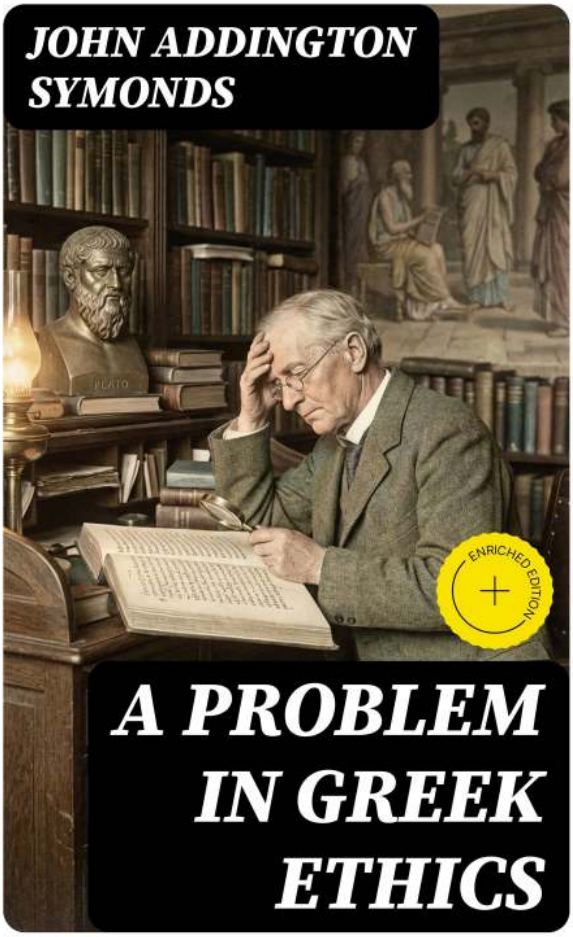
JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS



A PROBLEM IN GREEK ETHICS


JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS
PLATO
ENRICHED EDITION
A PROBLEM IN GREEK ETHICS

John Addington Symonds

A Problem in Greek Ethics

Enriched edition. Being an inquiry into the phenomenon of sexual inversion, addressed especially to medical psychologists and jurists

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Liam Oakley

EAN 8596547014485

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022

Table of Contents

Introduction

Table of Contents

Poised between admiration for antiquity and the unease of modern moral codes, A Problem in Greek Ethics maps the fraught terrain where eros, virtue, and civic life intersect. John Addington Symonds approaches his subject with scrupulous learning and a frankness tempered by caution, inviting readers to consider how ethical systems are shaped by language, custom, and power. Rather than seeking scandal or consolation, he asks what it means to read the past without forcing it to replicate the present. The result is a study that is at once historical and self-reflective, rigorous in its handling of evidence yet attentive to the dignity and vulnerability of human feeling.

First composed and circulated in the late nineteenth century, the work belongs to the tradition of historical and philological inquiry, written by a Victorian man of letters working under strict social constraints. Its subject is ancient Greece, not as a timeless emblem, but as a specific civic and educational culture in which forms of male-male attachment were articulated, debated, and regulated. Because candid discussion of sexuality was risky in its own era, the essay’s circulation was discreet, and its propositions are advanced with methodical care. It reads most accurately as a scholarly meditation rather than a manifesto, grounded in classical sources and cautious interpretation.

Symonds proceeds by surveying literary, philosophical, and historical testimonies, weighing terms, practices, and

ideals that framed affection and conduct. He pays sustained attention to how public institutions and pedagogic relationships inflected desire, how honor and reputation constrained behavior, and how competing norms produced both admiration and anxiety. The reading experience is measured and exacting, enlivened by a humane curiosity that resists both sensationalism and denial. The voice is analytic without being cold, and the style favors clarity over flourish, though moments of rhetorical force punctuate the argument when moral discernment and historical imagination must meet to keep anachronism at bay.

At the heart of the inquiry lies a distinction between ideals presented in literature and philosophy and the lived realities inferred from custom, law, and civic practice. Symonds asks how ethical language organizes experience, how praise and blame are distributed, and how friendship, mentorship, and desire are braided together yet kept under elaborate discipline. He does not reduce Greek life to a single pattern; instead, he cautions that practices varied across communities and epochs, and that any generalization must be tentative. This careful method allows readers to witness a spectrum of positions, from austere moralization to more celebratory accounts of love.

Themes recur with illuminating persistence: the education of desire; the tension between public virtue and private feeling; the uses of beauty in civic formation; the ambiguity of influence where affection and hierarchy coexist; and the labor of naming experiences for which languages supply multiple, contested terms. Symonds shows how ethics can be aspirational and regulatory at

once, how codes dignify love while policing it, and how ideals of self-mastery create their own paradoxes. By tracing these currents, the book demonstrates that moral life is not a single decision but a choreography of habits, hopes, and restraints that ask for interpretation.

For contemporary readers, the study matters as intellectual history and as a model of responsible engagement with sensitive materials. It clarifies that categories of sexuality are historically embedded, neither simple precedents nor mirrors of modern debates, and it shows how scholarship can widen the moral imagination while honoring the limits of evidence. In a time prone to polarization, Symonds’s restraint and perseverance offer an ethic of reading that refuses caricature. The work enriches conversations in classics, gender and sexuality studies, and the history of ideas, while reminding us that empathy requires precision and that precision serves humane ends.

Approached today, A Problem in Greek Ethics rewards patient attention to argument, vocabulary, and context, and it invites readers to calibrate sympathy with critique. Without prescribing conclusions, it equips us to ask better questions: how ideals travel across time, how institutions shape intimacies, how respect and desire can be held in ethical relation. Its continuing significance lies in the space it opens for thought rather than the closure it imposes, encouraging a disciplined curiosity that can face complexity without evasion. In that spirit, the book stands as both a document of its era and a resource for measured reflection.

Synopsis

Table of Contents

John Addington Symonds's A Problem in Greek Ethics undertakes a historical and philological inquiry into male–male love in ancient Greece, aiming to describe the phenomenon as Greeks themselves conceived it rather than through modern moral lenses. Symonds frames his task as clarifying terms, contexts, and values that governed conduct, while separating idealized theory from everyday practice. Attentive to the diversity of Greek city-states and periods, he proposes to trace how custom, law, philosophy, and literature fashioned norms around desire. The study's guiding question is not whether the practice should be praised or blamed, but how it functioned within Greek ethical thought.

Symonds assembles evidence from poets, historians, philosophers, orators, and visual culture to reconstruct a spectrum of attitudes. He parses Greek terminology and social roles to distinguish pedagogic bonds from commercial or purely sensual relations, emphasizing the difference between an ideal of character-formation and behaviors that contemporaries criticized. He notes the scarcity and partiality of sources, urging cautious inference and resistance to anachronistic judgment. By aligning textual testimony with civic institutions and customary expectations, he builds a layered account that treats the phenomenon as both a matter of personal relations and a subject of public concern and regulation.

Turning to origins and institutions, the study highlights practices associated with Dorian communities, frequently cited by ancient authors as exemplars of ritualized courtship and civic supervision. Symonds contrasts these models with Athenian ambivalence, where law, satire, and social decorum worked in tandem to police conduct. He outlines the gymnasium and symposium as formative spaces, and the paired roles often discussed by the Greeks as organizing ideals with ethical obligations. Across regions, he tracks how reputation, consent, and age norms were negotiated, and how law sought to distinguish honorable attachment from exploitation or commerce without erasing the underlying cultural valuation of beauty and virtue.

Philosophical treatments receive sustained attention, especially the Socratic and Platonic elevation of eros into an instrument of moral education. Symonds underscores the distinction, drawn by classical authors, between a noble affection oriented toward courage and excellence and a base indulgence condemned for intemperance. He follows arguments that subordinate bodily desire to the love of character and mind, while acknowledging the tensions between doctrine and practice. Ethical vocabulary—self-control, reciprocity, honor—emerges as a standard against which conduct was judged. This moralization, he argues, created a framework in which desire could be rhetorically purified without denying its experiential force.

The cultural record reveals both celebration and critique. Lyric and epigram idealize youthful beauty and mentorship, vase painting and public festivals normalize admiration, and rhetorical cases articulate civic boundaries by prosecuting

misconduct. Comedy mocks pretension and hypocrisy, while historians and moralists debate whether such bonds fostered solidarity or invited disorder. Symonds emphasizes how these materials collectively chart the passage from personal feeling to public meaning, embedding desire in education, citizenship, and reputation. He notes that martial and civic narratives often credited disciplined affection with strengthening communal ties, while simultaneously warning against excess and the corrosions of wealth and vanity.

Symonds then traces shifts across later Greek and Roman contexts, observing how changing mores, professionalized commerce, and new philosophies complicated inherited ideals. He marks intensifying anxieties over effeminacy and status, as well as adjustments in legal and rhetorical strategies aimed at preserving decorum. With the rise of Christian moral frameworks, earlier distinctions between noble and base forms lose their ethical centrality, and the phenomenon is recoded in theological terms. Yet classical texts preserve alternative valuations, ensuring that the debate over meaning and morality persists through transmission, commentary, and selective imitation.

Concluding, Symonds presents the Greek material as historically specific, internally diverse, and ethically argued rather than monolithic. He resists simple moral verdicts, suggesting instead that Greek authors articulated a sophisticated, if contested, attempt to discipline desire toward civic and personal excellence. Privately printed before wider circulation in the twentieth century, the essay has been read as a foundational contribution to modern

discussions of sexuality and classical reception. Its enduring resonance lies in modeling a documentary, context-sensitive approach that examines how cultures moralize desire, how ideals and practices diverge, and how the past complicates present certainties.

Historical Context

Table of Contents

In the 1870s and 1880s, Victorian Britain cultivated an intense engagement with classical antiquity through its universities, public schools, and publishing houses. John Addington Symonds (1840–1893), an Oxford-educated man of letters who later settled for health in Davos, wrote across Renaissance and Greek topics. Within this milieu he composed A Problem in Greek Ethics, an inquiry into male-male affection in ancient Greece. The essay emerged from a scholarly setting that regarded Greece as a moral and aesthetic touchstone, yet often filtered through Christian propriety. Symonds, already known for Studies of the Greek Poets (1873), approached the subject with historical tools drawn from philology and literary criticism.

Oxford’s Balliol College, where Symonds studied under Benjamin Jowett, shaped his reading of Plato and Greek ethics. Jowett’s influential translations of Plato (first volumes 1871) and his liberal Anglicanism encouraged English readers to treat classical dialogues as guides to character and citizenship. Across Britain, the “Greek” curriculum of elite schools canonized authors such as Homer, Plato, and Xenophon, presenting Greece as a training ground for gentlemanly virtue. Yet discussions of eros in the Symposium and Phaedrus were subdued or allegorized. Symonds’s essay answers that institutional silence by gathering the primary evidence and asking how Greek societies themselves understood such relationships.

Victorian law and censorship framed Symonds's decision to circulate his study privately. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 enabled authorities to seize printed matter deemed indecent, while the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 maintained imprisonment for sodomy. From the mid-century moral climate onward, reputation and livelihood could be destroyed by allegations alone. Although the Criminal Law Amendment Act's "Labouchere Amendment" (1885) postdates the essay's composition, it reinforced a culture of surveillance around male intimacy. Symonds therefore had A Problem in Greek Ethics printed in a very small, private edition in 1883, distributing copies only to trusted readers and scholars.

The essay sits at an early crossroads between classical scholarship and the nascent science of sexuality. In the 1860s Karl Heinrich Ulrichs published German treatises advancing the concept of the "Urning," arguing for the inborn nature of same-sex desire. In 1869 Karl Westphal's medical paper on "contrary sexual feeling" helped pathologize it, and Richard von Krafft-Ebing's Psychopathia Sexualis (1886) later catalogued sexual "inversions." These developments formed a broader intellectual backdrop. Symonds deliberately adopted a historical-philological method, assembling citations from Greek authors and contexts—law, education, and military life—rather than medical case histories, aiming to clarify how Greek societies themselves framed male attachments.

The classical material available to Victorian scholars documented varied Greek customs regarding age-structured male bonds. Plato's Symposium and Phaedrus elaborated

ideals of philosophical eros; Xenophon and Aeschines recorded civic anxieties about exploitation and public decorum; Plutarch and others described regional institutions in Sparta, Crete, and Thebes. Accounts of the Sacred Band of Thebes treated paired warriors as emblematic of valor and loyalty. Greek law and rhetoric distinguished between honorable attachments and venal prostitution. Symonds organized this evidence to trace differences across time and polis, emphasizing that Greek norms were debated and regulated, not reducible to a single, timeless practice.

Nineteenth-century Hellenism had been shaped by Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s celebration of Greek male beauty and, in Britain, by Walter Pater’s aesthetic criticism. These currents often praised Greece as an ideal of serene form, while sidestepping uncomfortable social facts. Simultaneously, elite education treated Greek antiquity as a moral exemplar for modern gentlemen. Symonds—author of The Renaissance in Italy (1875–1886) and widely read on Greek literature—worked within that tradition yet pressed it toward candor. By recovering the institutional settings of Greek eros, he challenged sanitizing readings without discarding the humanistic value ascribed to antiquity, threading a path between admiration and documentation.

Because open discussion risked prosecution and scandal, Symonds shared the essay only among confidants; during his lifetime it remained outside general circulation and drew little public comment. After his death, fuller publication became possible, and the study informed later debates in sexology and reform. Havelock Ellis acknowledged Symonds’s help on work that culminated in Sexual Inversion

in the 1890s, where classical precedents were part of the argument. Meanwhile, the Labouchere Amendment and the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 exemplified the punitive environment the essay had anticipated, sharpening its relevance as a learned counterpoint to sensational courtroom narratives and press campaigns.

A Problem in Greek Ethics thus reflects its era's contradictory impulses: classical reverence, moral vigilance, and the rise of social-scientific categorization. Symonds neither idealizes nor condemns antiquity; he reconstructs its debates to question the universality of Victorian norms. By grounding discussion in laws, customs, and canonical texts, he offers English readers a disciplined vocabulary for thinking about male love beyond scandal or euphemism. The essay simultaneously exemplifies Victorian humanist scholarship and quietly critiques the culture that made such scholarship dangerous to publish. Its persistence in private print testifies to both the risks of candor and the durability of learned argument.