
Homer's *Iliad* and the
Origins of Philosophy in
the West

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Please Silence your Cell Phones

The Homeric Question

- Who was Homer?
- Was he a real person?
- When did he live?
- Where did he live?
- How did he write these long poems?
- Are the stories “True”?
- What historic period, if any, do the poems reflect?

Traditional Answers

- Seven cities from Asia Minor coast and nearby Island claimed him in ancient times: Chios and Smyrna
- Poems are mostly in Ionic dialect
- Homeridae were his descendents; sang on Chios
- Dated originally to Bronze Age; later to Dark Ages;
- Recitation Competitions were part of Pan-Athenaic Festival under Peisistratus and Hipparchus

Parry-Lord Theory of Oral Composition

- Milman-Parry Theory: Homer was an oral poet singing a traditional song that originally had roots in Bronze Age
- Homer lived in Dark Ages, probably 8th century
- Someone else who knew writing wrote Homer down. When? Why? How?

Principles of Oral Composition

- Dactylic Hexameter: six feet of short, short, long
- Formulas: groups of words that appear in the same order often, and fit a particular metrical place in a line of verse
- Epithets: Swift-footed Achilles; Strong Achilles; Godlike Achilles
- Themes: arming; hospitality; supplication;
- Repetition: The Embassy to Achilles
- Creativity and originality is achieved through the embellishment of themes, arrangement, and the ability to weave various songs together

Haffa Theory: Homer as First Philosopher of the West

- Philosophy defined as Questioning traditional ideas of ethics and custom
- Achilles as the Anti-hero who questions traditional Greek ideas of heroic code
- Achilles as the first great figure of Individualism and Independence, the core of Western culture and belief
- Yet, Achilles struggles to seek out his own code of ethics in opposition to the values of his culture.
- In the end, Achilles will go beyond mere individualism toward a universalism that is the hallmark of a second concept fundamental to Western civilization: Humanism.

Traditional Code of Heroic Behavior

- Overriding Principle: Fight for your Comrades
- Protect Slain Comrades from Despoilment
- Despoil the Armor of your Enemy
- Leaders should reward good warriors with Booty
- Honor is won by battlefield exploits; Honor (how others view you) is the Supreme Ethical concern
- Booty is a visual symbol of your success in war
- Treatment of Defeated Enemy: Slay; Ransom; Enslave

Individualism, Honor and the conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon

- Book 1: Tension between respect for religion and respect for political authority; Priest Chryses demands his daughter, Chryseis back from Agamemnon.
- Honor of Agamemnon bound up in the girl
- Achilles' challenge of Agamemnon's refusal introduces a second tension: Honor of Political Power vs. Honor of Battlefield Virtue
- If either Achilles or Agamemnon compromise they will have lost Honor; Honor understood as the status of an individual in the eyes of his peers.
- This last tension reflects a tension of Dark Ages as they move away from Kingship toward Aristocracy and Democracy of Archaic age

Honor in Book 1, Achilles

■ “My honors never equal yours,
Whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold—
My arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting,
True, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder
The lion’s share is yours, and back I go to my ships,
Clutching some scap, some pittance that I love,
When I have fought to exhaustion.

No more now—

Back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far,
To journey home in the beaked ships of war.
I have no mind to linger here disgraces,
Brimming your cup and piling up your plunder.”

Ransom in Book 8: Traditional Idea of Honor Renewed by Agamemnon

- Achilles is offered a king's ransom by Agamemnon through an embassy:
- 7 tripods; ten bars of gold; 20 cauldrons; 12 horses; 7 women of Lesbos; Briseis and oath that he never slept with her; When they sack Troy he may choose 20 Trojan women, except not Helen; Choice of Agamemnon's daughter with no bride-price and as a dowry he will give 7 cities
- Yet, Agamemnon concludes: "All this I would extend to him if he will end his anger. Let him submit to me! Only the god of death is so relentless...Let him bow to me! I am the greater king, I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man!"

Odysseus restates the offer and emphasizes the Honor of Comrades

- Odysseus repeats the offer of Agamemnon, leaving out the last words and then says: “All this he would extend to you if you will end your anger. But if you hate the son of Atreus all the more, him and his troves of gifts, at least take pity on all our united forces mauled in battle here—they will honor you, honor you like a god. Think of the glory you will have in their eyes!”

Achilles' Rejects these Traditional Valuations of Honor and Meaning

- “No, what lasting thanks in the long run for warring with our enemies, on and on, no end? One and the same lot for the man who hangs back and the man who battles hard. The same honor waits for the coward and the brave. They both go down to Death, the fighter who shirks, the one who works to exhaustion. And what’s laid up for me, what pittance? Nothing—after suffering hardships, year in, year out, staking my life on the mortal risks of war.”
- Recounts all he has done and won in war; yet Agamemnon can take Briseis
- The Choice of Achilles and his Two Fates decreed by Zeus
- The honor of Man (Agamemnon and his Ransom) vs the Honor of Zeus: “What do I need with honor such as that? I say my honor lies in the great decree of Zeus.”

Pity for Comrades: Achilles Sees the Tears of Patroclus, Book 16

- “But Patroclus drew near to Achilles, shepherd of the host, shedding hot tears...
- Achilles: “Why, Patroclus, art thou bathed in tears, like a girl, a mere babe, that runs by her mother’s side and begs her to take her up, and clutches her gown, and hinders her going, and tearfully looks up at her...Or art thou sorrowing for the Greeks, how they are being slain besides the hollow ships by reason of their own presumptuous act?”

Patroclus' Appeal

- For truly all that they in the past were bravest lie among the ships wounded by arrows or spear thrusts. Wounded is Diomedes, son of Tydeus, and Odysseus, famed for his spear, and Agamemnon and smitten too is Eurypylus, with an arrow in his leg...When shall any man have profit of you Achilles, **if you do not feel shame before the Greeks?** Pitiless! Your father, Peleus was not your father, nor was the goddess Thetis thy mother, but the grey sea bore you, and the sheer cliffs, for your heart is unbending. But if you obey some word of your mother or some fateful oracle, send me at least to protect our comrades. Allow me to wear your armor...so that the Greeks, wearied as they are, may catch their breath; for scant is the breathing space in battle. And lightly might we that are unwearied drive men that are wearied back in battle away from the ships.”

Sorrow for Fallen Comrades

- Menelaos fights to protect the body of Patroclus, but he is alone against Hector and the Trojans and has to give ground. He does so after pondering whether it is shameful or not. He falls back to find help.
- He speaks to Aias: “Aias, come here, good comrade, let us hasten in defense of the dead Patroclus, if it be possible to bear forth his body at least to Achilles—his naked corpse; but his armor is in possession of Hector of the flashing helm.” (book 17)

The battle for the Body

- “Then the Trojans drove forward in close formation, and Hector led them. And as when at the mouth of some heaven-fed river the mighty wave roars against the stream and the headlands of the shore echo on either hand, as the salt-sea bellows about; even with such din of shouting came on the Trojans. But the Greeks stood firm about the son of Menoetius, Patroclus, with oneness of heart, fenced about with shields of bronze.

Adrestus' Supplication of Menelaos

- A minor Trojan supplicates Menelaos, Book 6, 60 ff.
- Menelaos is ready to accept
- Menelaos shoves him to the ground, and Agamemnon stabs him through with his spear.
- This makes Agamemnon look really bad, as the proper thing to do was enslave and ransom him.

Lycaon's Supplication of Achilles

- Previously captured and ransomed by Achilles
- Home only 12 days when captured again
- Alludes to the value he brought as a captive—100 Bulls
- His other brother, Polydorus, has been killed by Achilles
- Pity his mother
- He is only half brother to Hector; his mother is not the same.
- Achilles is merciless in the desecration of Lycaon's body

Brutal death of Lycaon, book 21

- Achilles' response to Lycaon's appeal: " Fool, do not offer ransom to me, and do not appeal. Until Patroclus met his day of fate, even til then was it more pleasing to me to spare the Trojans, and full many I took alive and sold oversea; but now is there not one that shall escape death..."
- After driving his sword into his neck and throwing the body into the river, Achilles speaks: "Lie there now among the fishes that shall lick the blood from they wound...neither shall thy mother lay thee on a bier and make lament; rather, the river Scamander shall bear thee into the wide gulf of the sea. Many a fish as he leaps in the waves, shall dart up to eat the white fat of Lycaon."

Hector's Supplication of Achilles

- Hector wears Achilles' armor, stripped from Patroclus's body
- Hector does not beg for life; He appeals for burial, 22.400 ff
- “Beg not me, dog, by knees or parents! Would that wrath and fury might bid me to carve thy flesh and eat it raw, because of what you have done...no man shall ward off the dogs from thy head; no, not though they should bring here and weigh out ransom ten-fold...not even if they should promise me thy weight in gold...but dogs and birds shall devour thee utterly.”

Desecration of Hector's Body

- The Greeks all stab his body
- For days his body is dragged around the city by Achilles chariot; the gods preserve the body with ambrosia
- Finally the gods tell Achilles that his wrath is too extreme
- The desecration of Hector's body transcends normal battle field ethics. Although the Greeks understood the wrath of Achilles at the death and despoilment of his comrade, grief has normal limits.

Supplication of Priam, Father of Achilles (24. 490)

- Priam enters the enemy camp secretly and appeals to Achilles
- “Remember thy father, O Achilles like to the gods, whose years are as mine, on the grievous threshold of old age. ...Pity me...I had fifty sons slain by the sons of the Achaians and this one, Hector, was the only one left to me...I have endured what no other mortal on the face of earth hath yet endured, to reach forth my hand to the face of him that hath slain my sons.”

Summary and Observations

- Love of Comrades and Desire for Honor were the basis of Battlefield Ethics
- One must protect their comrades' body and possessions
- Proper treatment of body essential to after life
- Supplication was revered by Gods and ordained by Society—with ransom and enslavement the customary treatment of the defeated
- Yet, battle could be brutal and once the 'rules of engagement' were breached, custom could be broken and war become yet more brutal
- Achilles questions the traditional ethics and his friend dies as a result
- He comes back to the fighting and then goes to the other extreme of inhumane wrath
- Achilles, though his wrath was extreme, was able to pity his enemy and achieves a universal observation of common Humanity of Man that transcends the battlefield.