
Morality and Virtue In Poetry and Philosophy: A Reading of Homer's Iliad XXIV

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It is apt for Plato to describe the quarrel between poetry and philosophy as an 'ancient' one (*Republic* 607b). Art and poetry reflect on our humanity; so does philosophy. Perhaps the affinity between poetry and philosophy is most clearly seen in the domain of human conduct or ethics. Both disciplines offer means for the enhancement of understanding, but this also leads to competition and tension. This article will examine what a poetic work of art itself can say about morality and ethics, and how morality in poetry can differ from morality in philosophy.¹ My example here is the final reconciliation of Achilles and Priam in the concluding book of the *Iliad*. The moral philosophies of Aristotle and Kant will provide some examples for the comparison. But first more needs to be said about moral motivation in philosophy.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant raises the question of what constitutes the moral worth of an action. He seeks to discover under what circumstances an action becomes a moral one. He then puts forward a moral philosophy which emphasises the importance of rationality in morality and argues that inclinations and impulses contribute nothing towards moral worth. Instead, moral worth consists in one's following a rational, *a priori* moral law which binds all rational beings.

¹ For a discussion of the notion of poetry in Homer, see Andrew Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

I am not going to examine the question of how a purely rationalistic moral theory can adequately guide our behaviour.² What is noteworthy is that Kant's moral philosophy has a reductive character. As its aim is to discover the essence of moral worthiness itself, the supposed essential element of moral worth excludes other elements in moral motivation. Note the example of a kind action done out of compassion which is claimed to have no moral worth while a kind action done for the sake of duty, despite the absence of any personal inclination to engage in such an action, does have moral worth.³ Kant argues that actions done out of impulses or inclination can lead to very different results; therefore, the good or bad consequences of the action itself cannot form the standard of moral evaluation. He also thinks that, although one's inclination can lead one to perform a kind or benevolent act, inclination itself is too contingent to be the guide of one's behaviour.

In this sense Kant's picture of morality seems to be in sharp contrast to Aristotle's. While Aristotle stresses the importance of upbringing and the development of virtuous character, Kant argues that morality is a matter of the exercise of one's freedom of will, which is autonomous and independent of any desire, feeling or impulse.⁴ One may reply that Aristotle and Kant are actually addressing two different issues in human life, the ethical and the moral. Basically, the ethical is concerned with how to live a good life and *eudaimonia* (flourishing or well-being), while the moral is restricted to judgements of right and wrong, which are by definition more narrow than the ethical as well as more abstract. However, there are certain overlaps between the inquiries of the two philosophers, and it seems that we cannot distinguish sharply between the moral (in the Kantian sense) and the ethical, for the ethical encompasses the moral.

² For a discussion of Kant's rationalistic moral project, see Simon Blackburn, *Ruling Passion: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), chapters 7 and 8.

³ See Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, chapter I, esp. 8-13 (second edition).

⁴ For an attempt to reconcile some issues between Aristotle's and Kant's moral philosophy, see Christine M. Korsgaard, 'From Duty and for the Sake of the Noble: Kant and Aristotle on Morally Good Action', in Stephen Engstrom and Jennifer Whiting (eds.), *Aristotle, Kant and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 203-236.

It is unnecessary at this point to decide which philosopher gives a better picture of morality or ethics, but it is against this background that I propose to examine the final book of the *Iliad* in order to see how a literary work of art can provide a different perspective that can well accommodate the complex nature of morality and ethics.

It should be emphasised that the interpretation of the *Iliad* given here does not show that the *Iliad* is a work on moral philosophy. The moral or, in a wider sense, the ethical is a concern of ours that is present in different areas and activities. The moral or ethical can enter the literary or artistic sphere, and there we can find an alternative treatment of morality that is different from that of philosophy.

Also it must be noted that the discussion here is not concerned with what the poet *means* in the *Iliad*, i.e., the meaning of words or the organisation of the text. My aim is to discuss the poem in relation to certain ethical questions and to see what relevance it has *for us*. In other words, the significance of the text, rather than the meaning, is the focus of my concern. Our understanding of Homer, in this sense, was not available to his ancient audience or readers.

Our understanding of Homer was not available to his ancient audience.

The following discussion will focus on the final book of the *Iliad*, though references are made to other parts of the poem. As Aristotle states that our ethical character as individuals is formed by our choice of actions over time, the ethical disposition of the characters in the *Iliad* and of the poet himself will be most transparent if the behaviour of the characters and the plot of the poem are considered as a whole. This means that the investigation of what a hero says, what ethical terms he uses, may not reveal much of his character. As the ethical perspective of the poem emerges from a holistic interaction between speech, actions, style and plot, its ethical character can be seen at one level as above poetic description and speech, yet at the same time the particulars of the poem ultimately constitute its ethical outlook.⁵

Ethical character formed by choice of actions over time.

The first contrast between a poetic work of art like the *Iliad* and a treatise on moral philosophy is that the former is set in highly

⁵ See Bernard Williams's discussion of the interpretation of moral and psychological thought in ancient Greek literature in Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), chapter one.

specific circumstances. The poet brings us to the final year of the Trojan war, which has already lasted for nine years.⁶ The long series of events that has led to the present situation is not recounted, for the poet assumes that the audience is already familiar with the story. The question concerning the origin of the war is not raised and the reality of war seems to be something given.

The warriors in the *Iliad* display a kind of morality, despite its dissimilarities to some modern notions of morality. Their behaviour is guided by the heroic code of glory and shame. Simplistically stated, a warrior's worth is defined by his ability to fight in battle, in which victory brings fame and glory and defeat brings dishonour and shame.⁷ The battlefield is a public domain where one's performance and ability can be seen directly by *others*. As a result, the warriors gain glory from winning in front of others. Avoidance of fighting is regarded as cowardly and most undesirable. Hector is the character who best exemplifies adherence to this code.⁸ It would be an oversimplification for the Homeric society of warriors to be conceived solely as competitive, since co-operation between members of the same group or tribe is also valued as a model of behaviour,⁹ but the reality of constant battle does colour our image of both the Greeks and the Trojans.

Before we are actually presented with any fighting scene, the cruelty and harshness of those involved are already quite vividly

⁶ For general introductions to the *Iliad*, see Mark W. Edwards, *Homer, Poet of the Iliad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins; 1987), Jasper Griffin, *Homer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Martin Mueller, *The Iliad* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1980), Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), M. S. Silk, *Homer: The Iliad* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Oliver Taplin, *Homeric Soundings: Shaping of the Iliad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁷ For a study of the ethics of shame and honour in Homer and Greek literature in general, see Douglas L. Cairns, *Aidos: The Psychology and Ethics of Honour and Shame in Ancient Greek Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, esp. chapter four, 'Shame and Autonomy'.

⁸ For a discussion of Homer's critique of the heroic culture based on the 'tragedy' of Hector in the poem, see James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*, Expanded Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994). See also Graham Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles: Characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 53-56.

⁹ See Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, chapter one.

portrayed. At the beginning of book I we see an offer of ransom from an old priest violently rejected by the Greek commander, Agamemnon. And this eventually leads to the intervention of Apollo and the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon. Hope for a peaceful settlement occurred when both sides agreed to have a truce (see book III), but it proved transitory. As the fighting begins, the brutal deaths of warriors signify waste and loss:¹⁰

There Telamonian Aias struck down the son of Anthemion
Simoneisios in his stripling's beauty, whom once his mother
descending from Ida bore beside the banks of Simoeis
when she had followed her father and mother to tend the sheepflocks.
Therefore they called him Simoeisios; but he could not
render again the care of his dear parents; he was short-lived,
beaten down beneath the spear of high-hearted Aias,
who struck him as he first came forward beside the nipple
of the right breast, and the bronze spearhead drove clean through the
shoulder. (IV 473-81)¹¹

Such deaths are repeated again and again in the *Iliad*, and often the poet reminds us that it is actual individuals with their histories who died, as if he is saying that all deaths have their own individual significance. As the narration goes on, the fighting becomes more and more brutal. The pledge for one's life by ransom, though once a possibility, is seen to be no real option when facing the stronger in battle, as Agamemnon and Menelaus show in book VI 37-65.¹² Blind destruction reaches its height when Hector, though an inferior warrior, is forced to confront Achilles, but the Trojan leader is fighting on behalf of the whole community of Troy, whose survival depends on him alone, as he tells Achilles: 'And indeed the war would be a lighter thing for the Trojans / if you were dead, seeing that you are their greatest affliction.' (XXII 287-88) The heroic code of honour itself is also put to the test by the poet as the exemplar of the code, Hector, is seen to have undergone certain changes from being a responsive, caring leader to a mere warrior lost in the

Heroic code of honour called into question.

¹⁰ For an interpretation of the *Iliad* with special emphasis on a blind force, see Simone Weil, 'The "Iliad", Poem of Might', in *Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks*, ed. and trans. by Elisabeth Chase Geissbuhler (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

¹¹ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

¹² Another example is *Iliad*, book XI 122-47.

*Excellence in
battle not the
only good
worthy of
attention.*

midst of battle.¹³ The animal similes employed by the poet are apt descriptions of the warriors, for, in fighting, their nature as cultured, sensitive, moral beings is lost; what is left are just brute forces opposing each other.¹⁴ After Achilles kills Hector in revenge for Patroclus and maltreats his body in triumph—of all the events in the poem, the act of utmost barbarity and cruelty—both the victor and the loser seem to be dehumanised, one as beast and the other as mere object. Symbolically, the fate of Troy is sealed, since Hector is portrayed as the sole defender of the city. As a warrior, Achilles proves his excellence in battle and gains great fame (*kleos*) in his killing of the Trojan champion. The story of Achilles as a fighter is completed here (at least in the *Iliad*) but the poem goes on, for the poet seems to be implying that excellence in battle is not the only good worthy of attention.

After Achilles' vengeance for his companion, funeral games are held in honour of Patroclus (book XXIII), which anticipates and prepares for the reconciliatory conclusion of the poem. The main events in the final book of the *Iliad* are Priam's ransoming of Hector's body from Achilles and the burial of Hector. As the conclusion of the whole poem, the ransom of Hector's body has profound and complex significance. Achilles' response to Priam's supplication immediately strikes us as an act different from physical excellence in battle. It also differs from other types of co-operative behaviour between warriors since it is an act of kindness offered to the enemy, with little prospect of reciprocity.¹⁵ One may naturally ask what motivates Achilles to act in such a way.

In (moral) philosophy, if the question concerning the motivation of an action is raised, the answer would normally lie in the object of the action. Thus Kant distinguishes morally the action done for the sake of some interests and action done for the sake of duty.¹⁶ Such an explanation of motivation seems to fit a simple

¹³ In book VI, Hector is characterised as responsive and sensitive; he can respond to Hecuba, Helen, Paris and show pity for Andromache. (For a discussion of the scene between Hector and Andromache, see W. Schadewaldt, 'Hector and Andromache', in *Homer: German Scholarship in Translation*, trans. G. M. Wright and P. V. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 124-42. By contrast, in book XXII, he is forced to ignore the plea for pity from his parents Priam and Hecuba.

¹⁴ See Weil, 'The "Iliad", Poem of Might'.

¹⁵ See Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, 117-18.

¹⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, chapter I, esp. 8-13.

case, but it is doubtful if it can do justice to a complicated action performed as a result of one's character and disposition. Achilles' response to Priam, which consists of not a single act, but a series of benevolent acts, is the kind of action that defies philosophical analysis. To dismiss that kind of behaviour as 'impure' or merely contingent (as Kant would do¹⁷) seems to result from a corrupt philosophical point of view. In real life we do not dismiss or condemn actions or behaviour simply because they are complicated; instead, we may respond to them with even greater care and attention. The demand for philosophical clarity in dealing with complex instances of behaviour in everyday life or literature seems out of place.

To examine the motivation of Achilles' response, a detailed investigation of book XXIV is needed. The image of Achilles as a cold, ruthless fighter with his mind fixed on revenge is not far away at the beginning of book XXIV. His maltreatment of Hector's body continues even after the burial of Patroclus:

. . . Remembering all these things he let fall the swelling tears, lying sometimes along his side, sometimes on his back, and now again prone on his face; then he would stand upright, and pace turning in distraction along the beach of the sea, nor did dawn rising escape him as she brightened across the sea and the beaches. Then, when he had yoked running horses under the chariot he would fasten Hektor behind the chariot, so as to drag him, and draw him three times around the tomb of Menoitios' fallen son, then rest again in his shelter, and throw down the dead man and leave him to lie sprawled on his face in the dust. . . . (XXIV 9-18)¹⁸

Achilles here is presented as someone consumed by grief and anger; he lies outside the normal human community and is unable to participate in communal activities.¹⁹ At this point the poet tells us that such behaviour is unacceptable for most of the gods, above all for Apollo and Zeus. A debate among the gods ensues and finally Zeus decides that a message be sent to Achilles that he should release Hector's body. Then Zeus calls upon Thetis, and she herself approaches Achilles with Zeus' command that Hector

¹⁷ See Kant, *Groundwork*, chapter II, 25-30, on examples in moral philosophy.

¹⁸ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

¹⁹ Note that the grieving Priam is also in a sense outside the normal human community. See Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, 122-25.

should be ransomed. Achilles obeys. How are we to understand the significance of these events?

The kind of divine intervention found here is not unique in Homer. The gods are represented as influencing human behaviour by giving advice in real life or in dreams, or by direct physical intervention, as in the case of Athena's assisting Achilles in his duel with Hector in book XXII. Divine intervention in Homer is sometimes described as 'double determination' since there seems to be two levels, one human and one supernatural, in decision making or in the determination of events.²⁰ Still, such a phenomenon is puzzling, for it is not clear how literally the ancient audience of Homer took such divine interventions, and certainly the modern reader cannot possibly believe that such poetic descriptions are true. Nevertheless, we can leave this question behind for the moment, since the consideration of Achilles' response in a wider context may throw some light on its full significance.

*Manner and
context of acts
morally
significant.*

If Achilles does Priam the favour of returning his son's body simply because it is an order from Zeus, we may question if what he does for Priam is an admirable act or not. It is worth remembering that Agamemnon obeyed a kind of divine order in book I as well, after the god Apollo sent a plague to the Achaian army. The difference between Agamemnon and Achilles lies in *the way* and *the context* in which they react to their circumstances. Agamemnon, for example, shows much reluctance in facing reality and following the divine order. Initially, he rejects unreasonably the supplication of the priest of Apollo, Chryses, for the return of his daughter, and it is only when the damage of the plague becomes unbearable that he yields to the opinion of Kalchas and Achilles and grants Chryses' request.²¹

The uniqueness of book XXIV becomes more obvious if we look

²⁰ For example, the advice and physical restraint from Athena to Achilles in book I (188-222) seems to be the corresponding divine part of Achilles' decision making.

²¹ Agamemnon's rejection of Chryses book I forms a contrasting parallel of 'ring composition' in book XXIV when Achilles willingly accepts Priam's supplication. For a summary of 'ring composition' in the structure of the *Iliad*, see Joachim Latacz, *Homer, His Art and His World*, trans. T. P. Holoka (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 108-119. For the parallels of divine behaviour between book I and XXIV, see Malcolm Davies, 'The Judgement of Paris and Iliad Book XXIV', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 101, pp. 56-62.

at the scene in which Priam entreats Achilles. Priam appeals not to the established custom or law, but simply asks for pity from Achilles, saying:

Remember your father, Achilles equal to the gods,
who is of my years, near the threshold of old age:
And when the nearby neighbours afflict him,
yet there is no one who can ward off war and destruction for him.
But if he hears that you are still alive, his heart
and spirit would rejoice, and in all his days he hopes
to see his dear son returning from Troy. . . . (486-92)²²

The response of Achilles shows a kind of recognition that he himself and Priam share a common humanity: the suffering of Priam, Peleus or Achilles does not carry any essential difference, and each can feel that of the others. Achilles sympathetically replies:

*Recognition
of common
humanity
indicated.*

Poor man, how much you've borne—pain to break the spirit!
What daring brought you down to the ships, all alone,
to face the glance of the man who killed your sons,
so many fine brave boys? You have a heart of iron.
Come, please, sit down on this chair here . . .
Let us put our griefs to rest in our own hearts,
rake them up no more, raw as we are with mourning.
What good's to be won from tears that chill the spirit?²³

He goes on consoling Priam, saying, 'So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men / live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows.'²⁴ Upon the realisation of a shared nature, genuine concern and respect for each other are possible again. Achilles himself carries Hector's body on Priam's wagon: an act that symbolically initiates the funeral of Hector.²⁵ Then he offers food and shelter for Priam, at which point both of them are readmitted to the communal, human sphere:

But when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking,
Priam, son of Dardanos, gazed upon Achilleus, wondering
at his size and beauty, for he seemed like an outright vision
of gods. Achilleus in turn gazed on Dardanian Priam
and wondered, as he saw his brave looks and listened to him talking.
(628-32)²⁶

²² My translation.

²³ The *Iliad*, book XXIV, 518-24. Translation of Robert Fagles, *Homer: The Iliad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

²⁴ The *Iliad*, book XXIV, 525-26. Translation of Robert Fagles. Cf. XVII 446-47.

²⁵ See Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, 119.

²⁶ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

Achilles' behavior transcends individual self-interest.

Here Achilles is not acting to further his fame, rather, he exhibits a compassionate and natural response to human suffering.²⁷ In this sense, his response is fundamentally different from the heroic code of fame and honour, which is both competitive and result-oriented. That Achilles can show compassion for Priam and return the body is not *solely* the effect of following some divine command or adhering to some moral code. We can detect certain elements behind such magnanimous behaviour, namely, the ability to transcend one's self-centred point of view and the compassionate recognition of the reality of human suffering. As a character of the epic, Achilles has already shown such a tendency in his earlier portrayal. Andromache tells us, in book VI, that Achilles did not strip the armour of Eëtion when he killed him during the sack of his city. Instead, he performed burial rites for the king and allowed the ransoming of the queen.²⁸ His withdrawal from fighting also implies his ability to distance himself from his personal role in the community. When Achilles questions the whole system of the heroic code, during his meeting with the embassy sent from the Achaians in book IX, we are reminded through the softening of his attitude during the visit that Achilles has a kind, affective character.

However, the *single* ability of transcendence or distancing does not necessarily produce admirable or virtuous action at every particular moment. As Achilles later replies to his defeated enemy, Lykaon, who is pleading for his life:

²⁷ Emphasis on the role of compassion in morality can be found in Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, and the work of the classical Confucian philosopher Mencius (4th century BCE).

²⁸ The *Iliad*, book VI, 416-27:

He [Achilles] killed Eëtion,
but did not strip his armour, for his heart respected the dead man,
but burned the body in all its elaborate war-gear
and piled a grave mound over it, and the nymphs of the mountains,
daughters of Zeus of the aegis, planted elm trees about it.
And they who were my seven brothers in the great house all went
upon a single day down into the house of the death god,
for swift-footed brilliant Achilleus slaughtered all of them
as they were tending their white sheep and their lumbering oxen;
and when he had led my mother, who was queen under wooded Plakos,
here, along with all his other possessions, Achilleus
released her again, accepting ransom beyond count. . . .
(Trans. Richmond Lattimore).

. . . So, friend, you die also. Why all this clamour about it? Patroclus also is dead, who was better by far than you are. Do you not see what a man I am, how huge, how splendid and born of a great father, and the mother who bore me immortal? Yet even I have also my death and my strong destiny, and there shall be a dawn or an afternoon or a noontime when some man in the fighting will take the life from me also either with a spear cast or an arrow flown from the bowstring. (XXI 106-13)²⁹

It is a plausible, if not praiseworthy, claim that the universal reality of senseless suffering entails that pain and suffering are insignificant since they are ubiquitous and bound to happen sooner or later. Here Achilles is seen as undergoing changes, from a prince who is concerned with honour and fame to a mere fighter who is obsessed with revenge. Still, his harsh vision of human reality here has not undergone much change; even in book XXIV, it is reflected in the consolation he offers to Priam:

Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals, that we live in unhappiness, but the gods themselves have no sorrows. There are two urns that stand on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessings. If Zeus who delights in thunder mingles these and bestows them on man, he shifts and moves now in evil, again in good fortune. But when Zeus bestows from the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure of man, and the evil hunger drives him over the shining earth, and he wanders respected neither of gods nor mortals. (527-33)³⁰

What makes a difference here is that the tragic and pessimistic vision of human life is *balanced* by the recognition of suffering as something that matters. In this sense, care and a sense of sympathy or compassion can be seen as the underlying basis of morality or ethics. Alternatively, one may also understand the difference as a return from the abstract to the particular, as the detached, 'objective' perspective which views human suffering indifferently is modified by a personal and emotionally charged standpoint.³¹ It must also be noted that this return to the particular is accompa-

²⁹ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

³⁰ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

³¹ For a discussion of the role of sensitivity and emotional response in the context of ethics and aesthetics, see David Carr, 'Art, Practical Knowledge and Aesthetic Objectivity', *Ratio (new series)*, XII, 3 (September 1999), 240-56.

Character
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nied by a kind of transcendence, namely, the extension of one's concern towards those who lie *outside* one's group.³² This seems to be more a kind of development or *perfection* of character than simply a matter of right and wrong, for the final state of character requires a kind of balancing and tuning of different inclinations and rationales, and it does not make much sense to say that Achilles was *wrong* in avenging Patroclus or killing other Trojans. It is the new vision acquired that allows the reconciliation between Achilles and Priam to take place. And it seems that no argument or reason-giving can lead Achilles to be in such a state, since it is the result of a process of unique personal experience.

Achilles' generosity would indeed be devalued if it were carried out with the aim of gaining fame or simply conforming to established rules. But the desire for gain is largely absent from Achilles' mind, as he has already shown indifference towards material honour-gifts in his reconciliation with Agamemnon (book XIX). As fighting resumes between the Achaians and Trojans (hinted at XXIV 667) and causes more suffering and deaths, including Achilles' own (an event not described by Homer but by later poets), Achilles' action accomplishes nothing in the long run. Seen in this way, Achilles' compassionate act is a paradigm case of respect, a kind of respect comparable to love, which is 'never of what is merely useful, no matter how vital to us that use may be.'³³ Such a respectful act is noble and desirable for its own sake, and it cannot be reduced to the claim that its value lies in the fact that it produces happiness or pleasure for the possessor, as argued by some forms of moral thought.³⁴ It is indeed essential for virtue to be practised without regard to the possible outcome and it is not inconsistent to claim that pleasure or happiness may be a *by-product* of being moral or virtuous.³⁵ In this sense, pleasure may or may not follow one's virtuous deeds.

³² Note that this feature seems largely absent in later ancient Greek philosophical ethics such as Aristotle's. For a criticism of Aristotle's notion of compassion, see Brian Carr, 'Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues', *Philosophy* 74 (1999), 411-429.

³³ Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 85.

³⁴ An obvious example here would be utilitarianism. In the *Republic* Plato seems to hold this view as well.

³⁵ Kant seems to hold a comparable view in his discussion of moral interest; see *Groundwork*, chapter III, 121-23.

At this point we can see that Achilles' behaviour, though an admirable act, is pointless in a sense, for it fails to establish anything of material significance in the long run. For Aristotle, it is an example of a virtuous action which is chosen for its own sake.³⁶ Kant also recognises this feature in a (morally) worthy act:

Therefore morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality, is the only thing which has dignity. Skill and diligence in work have a market price; wit, lively imagination, and humour have a fancy price; but fidelity to promises and kindness based on principle (not on instinct) have an intrinsic worth. In default of these, nature and art alike contain nothing to put in their place; for their worth consists, not in the effects which result from them, not in the advantage or profit they produce, but in the attitudes of mind—that is, in the maxims of the will—which are ready in this way to manifest themselves in action even if they are not favoured by success. (77-78)

No doubt for an action to be admirable or morally praiseworthy, it may sometimes need to be done regardless of success and advantage. However, we must distinguish Kant's position from that found in Homer despite the apparent similarity in spirit. Kant conceives of the moral dignity of actions in abstract terms as originating in autonomy from interested motives or heteronomy.³⁷ Homer's example, on the other hand, exhibits certain particular attitudes in particular circumstances. It is an important difference if we contrast other behaviour described in the *Iliad* with Achilles' kindness. The gods, who do nothing particular to achieve success, are the best examples of independence and autonomy. However, their independence from inclination and needs and their immortality actually make their existence and deeds trivial in comparison to the heroes such as Hector and Achilles.³⁸ In this sense, an admirable character or virtue is not the result of the possession of some general, formal qualities such as autonomy. We may therefore say that virtues consist of an interaction between one's attitude and the specific surround-

Virtues consist of interaction between one's attitude and constraints posed by circumstances.

³⁶ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a26-33.

³⁷ See *Groundwork*, 84-85. See Blackburn, *Ruling Passion*, chapters 7 and 8, for a discussion of the question concerning the practicality of the Kantian idea of pure rationality.

³⁸ See Jasper Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 'The Gods in the *Iliad*'; and Schein, *The Mortal Hero*, 'The Gods'.

*How one
accepts
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realities an
expression of
character.*

ings, which pose certain forms of limitation or constraint on the agent.

Kant's moral philosophy tends to devalue the importance of inclination, feeling, and desire due to their contingent, causally determined, and empirical nature. And moral worth is believed to be basically the autonomous exercise of one's freedom of will in accordance with rationality. In sharp contrast to this picture of the moral agent, Homeric men display a general acceptance of a kind of fatalism.³⁹ It is interesting to notice that, despite the presence of such fatalistic or deterministic thoughts, moral responsibility and praiseworthiness are still intelligibly discernible in Homer.⁴⁰ Yet, how such fatalistic thoughts are received by a person can express his or her moral or ethical character. The recognition of one's fate can take place in many different contexts. It can be a heroic acceptance of reality, as Achilles says to the dying Hector, who prophesies his death at the hands of Apollo and Paris: 'Die: and I will take my own death at whatever time/Zeus and the rest of the immortals choose to accomplish it.' (XXII 365-66)⁴¹ Sometimes, fatalism can be comforting to the heroes. When the warrior believes

³⁹ For the philosophical questions concerning free will and determinism, see D. J. O'Connor, *Free Will* (London: Macmillan, 1971). It is not clear whether in Homer there is logical-determinism (fatalism) or non-logical determinism. The gods, who determine human actions as a kind of cause, seem to be a threat to freewill in a way similar to non-logical determinism. However, the concept of fate, which means what is true cannot be changed, is also present in Homer expressed by *Moirai*. So that 'it is not destined that the city of the proud Trojans shall fall before your [Patroclus'] spear. . .'. (XVI 707-708). *Moirai* is also presented as a force overriding the power of the gods, including Zeus. Therefore fatalism and determinism are inseparable in Homer. However, this Homeric form of 'fatalistic determinism' does not seem to pose a serious threat to the individual's responsibility and moral or ethical character. A more puzzling case would be Agamemnon's speech in book XIX.

⁴⁰ See Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, for a discussion of agency and responsibility in ancient Greek thought. See W. Schadewaldt, W. (1959), 'Achilles' Decision', in *Homer: German Scholarship in Translation*, trans. G. M. Wright and P. V. Jones, 143-169. Schadewaldt comments, 'In this knowledge of the future his [the poet's] Achilles personifies the complete harmony of a man with the necessity from which he affirms what has been allotted to him and goes to meet his fate' (169). Kant admits that how pure reason is practical cannot be explained (chapter 3 of the *Groundwork*). A criticism of the Kantian notion of morality as exercise of one's freedom of will can be found in Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, especially in the Second Treatise.

⁴¹ Trans. Richmond Lattimore.

that the date of death is fated, says Hector, there is no worry of a sudden death that is beyond fate:

'Andromache, dear one, why so desperate? Why so much grief for me?
No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate.
And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it,
neither brave man nor coward, I tell you—
it's born with us the day that we are born. (VI 486-89)⁴²

Nevertheless, in another context, fatalistic thinking can be an expression of cowardice, as Paris replies to the reproach of Hector:

' . . . My own gifts are from pale-gold Aphrodîtê—
do not taunt me for them. Glorious things
the gods bestow are not to be despised,
being as the gods will: wishing will not bring them . . . ' (III 63-66)⁴³

Perhaps it would be futile to judge whether Paris' thinking is anyhow *philosophically* unsound or confused, but in the evaluation of his character Paris is clearly distinguished from other Greek or Trojan heroes. This suggests that virtues are expressed in particular ways and may bear little relevance to the notion of freedom.

We are now able to examine Achilles' ethical character in relation to the divine command from Zeus. As we have seen, Achilles' character and behaviour in book XXIV are the joint result of his own character and a complicated series of external events. So, despite the puzzling nature of the 'double determination', the divine command alone is not the sole motivation behind Achilles' behaviour; at most, it can be one among many other factors that produce his act. It is interesting to note that, although in Homer the command of Zeus comes from a divine source, it does not have the binding effect comparable to a law of nature. It is possible for the agent affected to act further in a certain way voluntarily out of his own choice, as Achilles' genuine concern towards Priam shows that it is more than a kind of mechanical following of rules.⁴⁴

Morality more than mechanical following of rules.

⁴² Trans. Robert Fagles.

⁴³ Trans. Robert Fitzgerald.

⁴⁴ One may try to understand the kind of divine intervention in Homer as alternative ways of describing certain unexpected, special, or unexplained events. In this sense, a modern counterpart of the command from Zeus could be a sudden realisation of one's previous value, triggered by the sight of an event or a special object. And it has been suggested that the plot of the *Iliad* can indeed make sense without taking the gods into account. I do not want to push this possibility too far, since the invocation of the supernatural in Homer does reflect

As a result, the nature of the divine command is complementary, rather than exclusive. Hence the juxtaposition of the divine command and the appeal to pity by Priam does not strike us as discordant:

Honour then the gods, Achilleus, and take pity upon me remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful; I have gone through what no other mortal on earth has gone through; I put my lips to the hands of the man who has killed my children. (XXIV 503-506)⁴⁵

Homer's rich and complex picture may actually be seen as a critique of the philosophical picture of motivation in the sense that it suggests that a morally admirable action can allow a plurality of motives which cannot be analysed separately.

Interestingly, Kant seems to recognise the practical difficulty of discovering the real motive of an action when he says:

We are pleased to flatter ourselves with the false claim to a nobler motive, but in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get to the bottom of our secret impulses; for when moral value is in question, we are concerned, not with the actions which we see, but with their inner principles, which we cannot see.⁴⁶

He then goes on to argue that examples are of no use in moral philosophy, since examples tell us what actually happens but, according to Kant, morality is about what *ought* to happen. The reason that Kant holds this position lies in his reductive and rationalistic approach, which takes the nature of morality as both formal and *a priori*. As a result, different kinds of motives behind an action are seen as mutually exclusive and incompatible. Kant is probably right if he claims that an action done *purely* out of the promotion of individual self-interest cannot be a moral one; but it is a dubious claim to say that a moral action, or an action of the greatest moral worth, is done *purely* for the sake of duty. This picture would appear problematic if we examine the examples of-

Kant's rationalism misses fact that good actions can have multiple motives.

certain differences in actual beliefs. The possibility that we can understand Homer despite some differences in mentality seems something interesting in itself.

⁴⁵ Trans. Richmond Lattimore. Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary Volume VI: Books 21-24* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), contrasts Priam's supplication here, which puts less emphasis on the ransom, with the one made by Chryses in book I.

⁴⁶ Kant, *Groundwork*, chapter II, 26.

ferred by Kant himself in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. When he discusses the relationship between duty and moral worth, he writes:

Suppose then that the mind of this friend of man [who used to act out of 'inclination'] were overclouded by sorrows of his own which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, but that he still had power to help those in distress, though no longer stirred by the need of others because sufficiently occupied with his own; and suppose that, when no longer moved by any inclination, he tears himself out of this deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone; then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth.⁴⁷

On a first reading the person described by Kant seems to bear a certain resemblance to the Achilles in book XXIV as someone deeply in grief. However, that the action done for the sake of duty alone has moral worth is not self-evident. Aristotle's picture of a virtuous person is one who does the right action resulting from his own inclination; if one's inclination is pushing in the direction opposite that of doing the right thing, it would be a sign of lacking moral virtue or the presence of weakness of will.⁴⁸ In this sense, Kant's example here of what constitutes moral worth is certainly not a case of perfected virtue in Aristotle.⁴⁹ It is not my aim here to deal with the differences between Kant and Aristotle. More important is that, in Kant's example, it remains unclear what is actually required by duty. To have a better understanding of this concept, we must look at how Kant explains the moral law or the categorical imperative with his own examples. He invites us to consider a case where someone tired of life asks the question 'whether taking his own life may not be contrary to his duty'. Kant argues that to take one's life cannot become a universal law of nature, for:

It is then seen at once that a system of nature by whose law the very same feeling whose function (*Bestimmung*) is to stimulate that

⁴⁷ Kant, *Groundwork*, chapter I, 10-11.

⁴⁸ For Aristotle's account of weakness of will, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VII. If Plato's position in the *Republic* is interpreted as an attempt to show that being just is more profitable than being unjust, then his account of being just or moral overlooks the importance of character and inclination in moral or ethical motivation. See above, chapter V.

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the discrepancies between inclination and duty in modern moral philosophy, see Stocker, 'Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories', in Crisp and Slote (ed.), *Virtue Ethics*, 66-78.

furtherance of life should actually destroy life would contradict itself and consequently could not subsist as a system of nature. Hence this maxim [to take one's life when it removes evils] cannot possibly hold as a universal law of nature and is therefore entirely opposed to the supreme principle of all duty.⁵⁰

It is far from clear that the destruction of one's own life is in any sense contradictory to the system of nature *as a whole*. In the actual natural world, there are examples of self-destructive behaviour in some species which helps to sustain their survival. In addition, Kant's argument ignores the particular context in which the action of taking one's life is done. Taking one's life in a certain frame of mind (confused or clear) or in extreme circumstances does make a difference to the act itself. To claim that taking one's life is against the principle of duty based on certain formal characteristics alone is a failure to recognise the varied and complex nature of human actions.⁵¹

If we look at our example of Achilles again, we can see that his act is situated in highly complicated and unique circumstances. And it is the particular way it is done that gives it its particular moral and ethical significance. One can insist that he acts kindly for the sake of duty, but as we have seen, there is something more than just acting for the sake of duty in Achilles' magnanimity.

*Virtuous
action specific
and precise.*

Aristotle characterises virtue as hitting a target. In other words, it is something hard to achieve. It is specific and precise; and, as we have seen, the virtue of Achilles in the example given involves a fine balance of inclinations. It is at the same time not totally spontaneous, in spite of the primacy of compassionate feeling, but something hard-won through a kind of self-overcoming.⁵² Any di-

⁵⁰ Kant, *Groundwork*, 53-54.

⁵¹ Kant gives other examples to illustrate the practicality of the moral law, but none of them is convincing as they all rely on dubious assumptions. One tries to show that indifference towards the promotion of others' well being cannot be a universal law of nature since 'many a situation might arise in which the man needed love and sympathy from others, and in which, by such a law of nature sprung from his own will, he would rob himself of all hope of the help he wants for himself' (56-57). The question of whether categorical imperatives are hypothetical imperatives in disguise is examined by Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, part II.

⁵² Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles*, 118-20, describes Achilles' release of Hector's body as involving a kind of 'intense internal struggle', as arising from the conflict between Zeus' command and his personal anger against Hector. I would

vergence from this state may easily produce the opposite of virtue—i.e., vice—as the scene between Achilles and Lykaon shows. This suggests that there is a kind of asymmetry between virtues and vices in the sense that virtues only admit a limited way of realisation or expression while vices can cover an unlimited range of possibilities.⁵³ Even in a case where a person has her mind fixed upon the achievement of virtue, the very fact of this thinking may render the virtue being sought distorted or flawed. As we have seen, true virtue involves a responsive attitude to others and the surrounding circumstances. So, a concern purely for the attainment of virtue itself may direct our attention away from other people and the circumstances. An example of this would be a person whose concern for the ‘intrinsic value’ of a virtue has diverted her attention from the other considerations and elements that are part of what constitutes the virtue itself. Being obsessed with the virtue of generosity, she may perform acts of generosity *without* proper regard to the personal needs of the people affected by her acts, or to how much she is spending. In other words, a mind that is too focused on virtue or duty can suffer certain blinding effects in its perception of the particulars and hence character.⁵⁴

rather characterise the cause of the presence of struggle within Achilles as the conflict between the corrupting circumstances of warfare and the inherent humane character of Achilles himself (as hinted at various points in the *Iliad*).

⁵³ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b28-35: ‘Moreover, there are many ways to be in error, since badness is proper to what is unlimited, as the Pythagoreans pictured it, and good to what is limited; but there is only one way to be correct. That is why error is easy and correctness hard, since it is easy to miss the target and hard to hit it. And so for this reason also excess and deficiency are proper to vice, the mean to virtue; ‘for we are noble in only one way, but bad in all sorts of ways.’ (Trans. Irwin.)

⁵⁴ We may characterise this problem as the ‘paradox of virtue’. An ancient formulation of it can be found in the Daoist text, *Dao De Jing*, chapter 38: ‘The man of superior character [*de*, virtue or excellence or ‘*aretē*’] is not (conscious of his) character [*de*], hence he has character [*de*]. The man of inferior character [*de*] (is intent on) not losing character [*de*], hence he is devoid of character [*de*].’ (Translation taken from Lin, Yu Tang, trans. *The Wisdom of Lao-tse* (Taipei, 1994). Cf. D. Z. Phillips’s comment on Nussbaum: ‘Nussbaum speaks as though character were an end of our actions. It is something that shows *in* our actions. Thus, despite the many popular offers to build character, as though it were an end for which a therapeutic means can be found, the unrecognized feature of such offers is precisely their lack of character. One does not develop a moral character by thinking of one’s deeds as the means of attaining it. If one is honest *because* one wants to have an honest character, one will find oneself thinking about oneself,

Being moral a synthesis of perception, inclination, reasoning, and character.

Being moral, or having true virtue, is not simply a matter of how one acts; it is a synthesis of one's perception, inclination, reasoning, and character.⁵⁵ Therefore, we are again back to the particulars, since what is needed to guard against defects is nothing more than a balanced, open, and perceptive vision of different, rich particular elements of moral or ethical concern. The understanding of moral or ethical thinking at the theoretical or *a priori* level is incomplete, since our acting morally or ethically is ultimately based on particular situations.⁵⁶ A theoretically sound morality may appear defective only in a particular circumstance.⁵⁷ In this sense, our literary example from Homer, which is based on the particulars and free of theoretical thinking, provides a context in which we can understand the nature of virtue and morality.

To conclude, we may say that the ending of the poem is also a statement of a moral or ethical ideal. Instead of giving arguments, Homer presents us in the *Iliad* with a complex moral picture that does not proceed from abstract principles. In contrast to certain characteristics of modern moral theory, little emphasis is laid on abstract concepts such as rationality or the maximisation of hap-

the image of oneself.' D. Z. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 141-42.

⁵⁵ Cf. Mencius' statement that the ideal way is that people are '...acting from benevolence and righteousness, not acting benevolently and righteously.' (Mencius, 4.47/4B19, my translation).

⁵⁶ Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* can be regarded as the unfolding of Raskolnikov's theory and conception of killing and murder, where the theory itself is not questioned or criticised on a theoretical basis but on a practical and particular basis. The conclusion suggests that, after the series of events, Raskolnikov himself was changed and the theory disappears. As Dostoevsky writes near the end of the novel: '... But he [Raskolnikov] could not think for long together of anything that evening, and he could not have analysed anything consciously; he was simply feeling. Life had stepped into the place of theory and something quite different would work itself out in his mind.' (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett [New York: The Modern Library, 1950], 628.)

⁵⁷ See Brian Carr, 'Pity and Compassion as Social Virtues', *Philosophy*, 74 (1999), 411-429. Carr criticises Aristotle's and Martha Nussbaum's treatments of pity and compassion as self-centred. Although it is not clear whether Aristotle's and Nussbaum's positions are inherently self-centred, Carr's criticism suggests that pity and compassion can be expressed in different, particular ways, and it is possible that some particular forms of pity and compassion are not altogether morally or ethically sound.

piness. Rather, we are invited to appreciate certain particular moral or ethical values incorporated in Achilles' action. He has acted with true kindness and magnificence out of compassion; he has not done it to gain more fame, and his action defies the analysis of established rules for conduct. As this forms the concluding part of the whole poem, Achilles' humane behaviour as described by Homer has both artistic and moral/ethical significance. And unless one can see that such an action is good in itself, one cannot appreciate the poem as complete and unified.⁵⁸ The ability to do so, as I have tried to show, consists in a responsive engagement with the work's rich particulars. The very possibility of appreciating the *Iliad* despite its remoteness from us in time and culture seems to suggest that there is much common ground between Homer and ourselves.

⁵⁸ This is reflected in the fact that the theme in *Iliad* XXIV did not receive much treatment or reworking in later Greek tragedies. A later work dealing with the notion of compassion along the line of the *Iliad* is Sophocles' *Ajax*.