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Wladislaw Klossowski
Grand Valley State University

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EXCELLENCE AS A TRAGIC IDEA

Wladislaw Klossowski

I

No doubt, excellence presents itself always as an unexceptionably excellent thing. The word itself — *excellence* — encourages tautology. It poses as its own best measure of its own goodness. The word tends to disarm the critical faculty; it calls forth approval as a reflex. And perhaps we should expect that when a word is attended by such unreflective, even autonomic, responses, then similar thoughtlessness will attend the reality toward which the word points.

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Surely this is the case with excellence — both the word and the thing — in our time. We admire and reward excellence as a matter of course; and as naturally as we love our children, we encourage them to pursue excellence. That which is to be pursued is human excellence, prowess, a level of achievement, not an object — superlative musicianship, say, rather than an extensive record collection. Objects — fine records — are good in themselves but worth even more as monuments testifying to the achievement of a maker. So too, a fortune marks the financial wizard, ten gold medals the surpassing athlete. What is admired uncritically is capability and all its effects. We may, possibly, deplore the use to which a great fortune is put; we may be disappointed when a great athlete sells himself to sell laxatives. But no bad thing is perceived as a necessary concomitant of human excellence. Hence our envy of the achievements themselves remains unmixed, pure. In our time, we honor excellence unreservedly and believe it represents an unqualified good — good for the possessor, good in its works, good for society, morally and humanly good.

It is not true, however, that the idea of excellence has never been examined. Indeed, to cast a cold and steady eye at the idea of excellence may have been the great labor of antiquity. Tragedy — that is, the essential idea rather than the dramatic form — may be that great labor. Tragedy, that vision of human aspiration in pitiful and fearsome tension with human limitations, that celebration of human grandeur turned against itself by the ineluctable nature of things, may be the inspired recognition of the ambiguous character of human excellence. If we go back three centuries before the age of classical tragedy, we may see Homer's *Iliad* as an instructive text, a liberating counsel reaching forward through the centuries to disenthral us from our confusions about excel-

lence. The *Iliad*, as a war poem, examined only one kind of excellence, martial prowess. Perhaps tragedy is more readily associated with lethal military endeavors than with any other pursuit of excellence, for tragedy is readily – too readily – identified with early or violent death. However, we should bear in mind that great fictions even in their particularity present general truths, that the concrete in art often points toward universals. We need not take it for granted that what the *Iliad* says about bronze age soldiers applies generally to post-industrial civilians; but neither should we be surprised to find that Homer's story about a particular hero – Achilles – is emblematic of the pursuit of excellence anytime. And it is the thesis of this paper that the tragedy in the *Iliad* is only incidentally related to the hecatombs of battle and is directly linked with success, pre-eminence, excellence.

But before turning to the orderly vision of the *Iliad*, we might look at the problem as it presents itself to us. Now, obviously, not everyone is confused by the idea of excellence. But the word generates so many unacknowledged muddles that no one, no matter how precise his own apprehension of the idea, can even allude to excellence without first composing a substantial prolegomenon of definitions, exclusions, and consequences.

It may be objected that *democracy* or *religion* or *love* or, indeed, many other words designating grand concepts must also be defined on each occasion of their use. True, but these *look* like grand concepts, great sprawling abstractions with shifting, fuzzy borders, whereas *excellence* has all the signs of a hard, precise word enjoying a necessary and exclusive relationship with something palpably manifest in the world. Adam, naming the animals in the Garden, is said to have named a toad a *toad* because it looked like a toad. If *excellence* were a beast, Adam might have applied the same rationale.

It is revealing to look up the word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. First, we must be struck by the briskness with which the word is dispatched; fewer than four columns suffice for *excellence* and all its friends and relations, such as *excel*, *excellency*, *excellently*, *excelling*. It takes twelve columns for *love* alone, quite apart from its derivatives. Then, we must be struck by the singleness and narrowness of the definitions. The word is proof against pejoration. All definitions imply an affirmative and comparative judgment: excellence is good because it is better. Excellence is pre-eminence over others, superiority over others, and that is always a good thing. (It is perceived as a bad thing only through rhetorical

refraction, as in the phrase “excelling in mischief.”) Since the word necessarily implies the idea of competition, since excellence indicates a winner and a winner implies losers, it is curious, if not alarming, that in English no negative associations have ever attached themselves to the word.

Excellence proceeds from great ambition or — to use a milder, less aggressive term — aspiration. Quiet competence, the ability to do the job at hand, together with a reluctance to rise above the job — that is another matter. For competence is determined by reference to the job to be done. Furthermore, the task is presumed to be finite and possible, as for example the repair of an engine. Excellence, on the other hand, is determined by reference to the competition. Moreover, the task is infinitely demanding; so we can talk of a perfect repair job on a car or a perfect job of typing but not of perfect mastery of the cello or of a perfect poem. If fifty million people could play as well as Pablo Casals, they would not be considered excellent cellists. But from those millions would emerge a few gifted and dedicated people who would make a finer, more sensitive, more profound attempt to express the ineffable on four strings. These few would be virtuosi, the others amateurs and dabblers. True, the skill of the latter might still be richly rewarding for them, more profitable for the spirit than playing the ocarina by ear. But it would be said of them, with curious condescension, that they play or work at their music for its own sake, for its intrinsic pleasure. (That would seem a clear indication that the virtuosi have other ends in mind.)

Some may deny all this, arguing that excellence need not be competitive, that excellence may relate to something in nature itself; for example, a scientist or doctor might be excellent in regard to his conquests of nature, his discoveries or cures. But the extent of his conquests over nature must inevitably be judged by reference to the conquests of others; any scientist eventually butts up against the unknown, but an excellent scientist solves more riddles than others can solve. Similarly, all doctors’ patients are doomed, but excellent doctors keep death waiting longer than do ordinary practitioners. Furthermore, experience suggests that scientists no less than soldiers covet fame and glory, that is, they see excellence as the triumph of getting there first, before the competition, as the race for the DNA molecule demonstrates once again. Indeed, the history of science is studded with rivalries. And the practice of naming diseases after the discoverers implies that an immortal name is highly prized, even when that name is associated with a human ill.

Excellence enjoys a covert and only quasi-legitimate relationship with a

host of other qualities, among them virtue, happiness, power, vocation, human worth, and social value. Excellence is often identified with virtue but often only in order that, as necessary consequence, mediocrity may be damned as a vice or, at the very least, as presumption. Thus it is that mediocre endeavors of art, so innocent and so without baneful consequences, are sternly dealt with. A poem or film which fails as high art is more often regarded as a misdeed, a misdemeanor, rather than a gallant effort. This high indignation is to be found high a low, in the *Times Literary Supplement* and in the film reviews of the *TV Guide*. It is at least plausible that censure of this sort proceeds from an unacknowledged assumption that the poem is not its own end, is not really concerned with its ostensible subject; it is, rather, a tacit boast, the poet's claim on glory and renown. And it is as such that it must be challenged.

The religious concept of vocation, grossly transmogrified, is now honored as professionalism. Professional excellence seems to be its own justification or excuse. Virtue, as generally understood, is often waived as an irrelevancy. The superlative burglar or con man is a familiar culture hero celebrated in countless films and novels. He is often a personable fellow who plans and executes capers of such finesse that he might easily earn an honest living with his left hand alone, but for his dedication to the pure form of his calling. Less benign is the case of the professional soldier or professional spy in a world of real overkill and real moral confusion. One such soldier, standing at his post in the doomsday center under Omaha, Nebraska, when asked whether he would really obey an order to atomize the world, really replied that on that grave occasion he would think only of his duty as a professional. One must not imagine that such dedication is without its measure of pain.

The chairman of the board of a corporation found corrupting the government or degrading the environment or poisoning the consumer will argue that his primary responsibility is to his stockholders or to the survival of the corporation. Behind the gaseous cliches of "trade-offs" and "hard decisions" may lurk some anguish of spirit; after all, as a citizen, he depends upon his government; as a human, he identifies with his neighbors. But in both cases, that of the soldier and of the captain of industry, we are enjoined to honor the heroic suppression of natural human feeling, of personal inclination, of private morality. For the general or the executive to suffer these to prevail would be self-indulgence. It would indicate an unwillingness to make a total surrender of self to a higher end. It would indicate a flawed sense of vocation.

If excellence is its own excuse, it is not, apparently, its own reward. As we have seen, the idea of excellence implies comparative judgments, or competition. And competition is cruel. Everyone agrees that not all humans are fit to compete. If happiness is a feeling, a private sense of well-being, rather than an objective fulfillment of a high destiny, then happiness assumes an antagonistic relationship with excellence: those who cannot compete are denied the agonies of exalted performance and consigned to mere happiness. It is an old idea expressed at varying levels of sophistication and with divers intentions. In Greek tragedy, for example, the chorus habitually congratulates itself on its mean and low estate; it is grateful to be free of the burden of greatness. Nature poetry, for another example, is anti-heroic in theme: how vainly men themselves amaze, to win the oak, the palm, the bays. One vigorous strain in American education holds that happiness and self-acceptance and tranquillity of mind are well worth their price in success or achievement. And everyone is familiar with the argument for slavery in the old South: the simple darkies were happier in a non-competitive status; they were free in a real sense – free from aspiration. This general theme, even in its most hypocritical form, may be more hopeful and well-wishing than social Darwinism, which consigns to extinction those who cannot compete. Yet the implication, whether acknowledged or not, is that happiness and excellence are mutually exclusive. And happiness is a consolation prize for losers.

Some may wish to argue that happiness, even defined narrowly as a subjective state, is the Queen in her high silk pavilion; to wear her colors while contending in the dust of the arena is to enjoy her favor. To fight well, win or lose, is bliss itself. A pretty picture, that of the happy warrior. But society's unromantic system of rewards belies it. Excellence is promoted by brute external incentives like power, money, privilege, and prestige, which are conferred only after the fight and only to winners. A poet like Frost might say, of the notably unheroic, unchivalric job of mowing hay, that "The fact is the sweetest dream that labor knows." But everyone believes that who wields the scythe cannot wield the sword; the haymaker is someone who cannot compete for higher prizes and makes hay happily but not excellently. Or, to shift the argument to still another scene: in odd corners of Academe, a small, self-effacing voice is regularly heard to say that low salaries will not adversely affect the quality of teaching. But merely to point to this phenomenon is to indicate, for most people, the utter bankruptcy of the idea that excellent work is its own reward.

No, the Lady in the silk pavilion is not Happiness. She goes by other names: Glory, Power, Fame, Renown. That she is up there, aloof, inde-

pendent, altogether separate from the combatants, indicates emphatically that her favors are dispensed at some remove from the fight. The fight may be the way to her heart but it is certainly not the consummation of the affair.

There are indeed intrinsic pleasures in combat: intensity of feeling and perhaps the sense of triumph. But these are momentary or incidental or both. Imagine the pavilion empty, the stands deserted: will two champions joust for the sheer pleasure of it? Not impossible but not likely either.

When virtue, a high calling, and self-surrender conjoin, we have an odd form of excellence, one which is absolutely its own end, e.g., sainthood. For a would-be saint, the faintest desire for the rewards of sainthood — a shrine for his bones, an immortal name, the prayers of the faithful — is an immediate and final disqualification. Saints find themselves by losing themselves in love and good works — not successful works, not effective works, but rather actions performed in the right spirit. The disjunction between saintly perfection and the excellence heeded in this darkling world is evoked by William Butler Yeats in "The Choice":

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work,
And if it take the second must refuse
A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.

The general opinion has it that society's work is not done, excellently or otherwise, by saints. Society offers rewards to those who, raging in the dark, do its work well; and the rewards cause the work to be excellently done. The rewards, then are external to the tasks themselves and — further — represent compensation not for pleasurable but for painful endeavor. Excellence, like sainthood, demands self-sacrifice, total submission of self to the task at hand. But the task is a means of aggrandizing the self. The rewards of self-surrender are a constant incentive, not part of the surrender itself.

Of course, no one denies that excellence also requires a native gift. The soldier must have innate propensities toward violence, the chairman of the board an irresistible proclivity to manipulate things and people. In addition, everyone agrees, chance plays a contributory role. Yet though no one denies the importance of talent and luck, it is clear that excellence is revered because it is the consequence of pain or *discipline* — that deeply religious word still carrying with it vestigial memories of self-flagellation and the hairshirt. It is that discipline, secularized, that society's rewards

are supposed to buy. It is by virtue of his discipline that the honored soldier distinguishes himself from the thug. It is discipline that turns natural aggressiveness to socially useful ends.

Yet whether society can indeed encourage excellence and harness it for the common good remains an open question. That a professional military can be used in wars conducted strictly in national self-interest, that multinational corporations — or even local business, for that matter — can be made to serve human needs, that science can be made to serve the society that sponsors the scientists — these propositions remain highly problematical. Obedience is the corporal's virtue, not the general's. Excellence demands perseverance, stubbornness, a monumental ego, not tractability, not subservience. The irony may appall us, but perhaps mediocrity is of more use to society than excellence.

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In sum, then, what is this excellence that is so universally revered? It proceeds from ambition, particularly the egotistical ambition to triumph over others, to be famous. It is far removed from the pursuit of virtue — so far as to become a peculiar virtue unto itself, in defiance of the usual norms. In the pursuit of excellence and of such rewards as power, glory, honor, one must be prepared to forgo happiness or "perfection of the life." Furthermore, a person's dedication to excellence makes him potentially dangerous and anti-social. And for the word that points to this constellation of ill-omened stars, the dictionary can cite no pejorative meanings.

II

Homer knew better. And so did his age. No doubt, in his time the young were encouraged to excel. But, judging from both the nature of the *Iliad* and its popularity, excellence was not disguised; the dreadful contradictions, the cross-purposes and the inevitable losses, the awful roles of Chance and Fate, the awful ambiguity of the gifts of the gods — these are the abiding preoccupations of the *Iliad* and these were, therefore, familiar to any aspiring young soldier. The *Iliad* not only encouraged novice warriors to weigh and balance the profits and the losses of the pursuit of excellence; more important, the young were warned, by this poem, that their weighing and balancing could bring them full consciousness but not full control, that in the very nature of things, when they knew enough to choose wisely, it would be too late for any choice. Such a congeries of ironies makes of excellence an exalted and destructive — that is, a tragic — ideal.

Homer's hard look at excellence, transmuted into dramatic form, finds its locus in the sensibility of Achilles, the very first of soldiers. Achilles is not only the embodiment of excellence; he becomes, in the course of the poem, the impassioned critic of it. Indeed, since he sees excellence from the inside, he is best fitted to understand it, best fitted to judge the truth and falsity of its promises.

The particular form of excellence which Achilles will call into question – military prowess – is drawn in severe and emphatic terms, without blurring of horrid detail, without any softening of outline, utterly without euphemism. The *Iliad* is often regarded as a "courtesy book" for soldiers, that is, not quite an army manual but a literary text at once defining and celebrating a stern and heroic code of behavior and system of values. On the other hand, the *Iliad* is often instanced as an anti-war poem. The two views are not contradictory, except at a superficial level, and both are true to the poem. The martial code, the militarist vision of the good life, constitutes the ideological context of this epic; it is the ethos or cultural background against which the entire action of the narrative is played. The goodness and rightness of this structure of value every character accredits; only Achilles, the hero, questions the code. He perceives, finally, its true greatness and its true horror, a horror vastly deeper than is suggested by the endlessly repeated scenes of godlike young men, their knees unstrung, tumbling into the dust with a clatter of armor. War emerges as the most exalted and noble work, the highest proof and most emphatic symbol of human excellence, a monument of self-destruction dedicated to egotism and personal pride. War is a lethal sport which, thoughtful warriors come to realize, is the only use for their gift, for that talent which it is death to employ and another death to hide.

What is the heroic value system? Its first principle is that glory and fame won in battle are the highest ideals and well worth the risk, even the loss, of life. The worth of a man depends on his prowess in battle and even more perhaps on his courage. Glory and fame are the recognition by others of a man's courage and prowess, his human worth. In a philosophical sense, as well as in a physical and violent way, the end of the soldier's craft is to compel recognition of excellence.

If these are the highest ideals, then certain things follow. War is conducted mainly to promote the opportunities for fame and glory. War is man's most exalted work; and like another exalted work, art, it serves no useful or practical purpose. War is not fought for national self-interest. Even the Trojans, who are defending their city, are motivated by honor

rather than self-interest. After all, mere self-interest would have moved them to send Helen back to Menelaos — a prudent course they briefly consider. Nor is the Trojan war an ideological war. Both Trojans and Achaians honor the same ideals. Though combat is intensely emotional, there is a great respect between combatants, much as there is, sometimes, in sport. This sporting ethic is emphasized in the duel between Hektor and Aias, which ends in an exchange of gifts and courtesies. Hektor says: “Let . . . the Achaians or Trojans say of us: ‘These two fought each other in heart-consuming hate, then joined with each other in close friendship, before they parted.’”⁹ The distinction between sport and war is consistently blurred; the funeral games include fights with deadly weapons. The contestants are friends engaged in sport.

Neither does the desire for plunder motivate heroes. They do take plunder, of course. And Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel over the division of the spoils, particularly over the girl Briseis. But Briseis, like Helen herself, is merely the visible symbol of honor; poor thing, she is bestowed in recognition of and respect for Achilleus’ accomplishments in war.

The heroic military ideal is radically individualistic. Hence relations among Homer’s warriors are not formalized, as in a modern army. Rank is not conferred by the organization, nor does the system enforce respect for rank. In the Greek and Trojan armies, respect can never be assumed or taken for granted, not even by a general like Agamemnon. Rather, a man must compel respect by his own force of character or strength of arm. Indeed, the quarrel in Book I is precipitated by Agamemnon’s anxiety over the honor and respect accorded him. He must assert his authority, he must exercise his command, or lose it. Since the war is going badly for the Greeks, he is particularly in need of whatever executive aura he can draw to himself.

Heroic combat is also individualized. Armies of heroes do not fight as integral and unified organizations but as agglomerations of individuals or clusters of intimate friends. Each man seeks to demonstrate his worth and win honor and glory. True, the common cause has some importance — the whole *Iliad* is about that anger of Achilleus which “put pains thousand-fold upon the Achaians, hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls of heroes” (I, 2-3). But finally, individual glory must take precedence over group success. Since personal fame is the end of war, war must be a series of duels or personalized combats; these are generally uncoordinated and they occur as the spirit moves the combatants. (Never

⁹Translated by Richmond Lattimore (University of Chicago Press, 1951), Book VII, lines 299-302. Subsequent quotations acknowledged in parenthesis in text.

do anonymous soldiers confront each other; name; parentage, country of origin and claim to rank in the roll of fighters are all boastfully announced before a blow is struck.)

The military ideal involves usually an absolute commitment that amounts to an act of faith. Heroic boasts and taunts are, in effect, oaths which bind a man to a glorious enterprise. When a hero boasts, he not only antes up his life but recites a credo, a confession of the central dogma around which his life turns: the pursuit of excellence. It is more important for a soldier to keep faith than to think. Hence when, at the beginning of Book IX, Agamemnon re-thinks the war and decides that it would be better "to run away to our ships to the beloved land of our fathers," he is repudiated by Diomedes: "Sthenelos and I will fight till we witness the end of Ilion; for it was with God that we made our way hither" (IX, 48-49). War is a compact with God which cannot be re-negotiated. The good soldier — and Diomedes is a model — does not allow himself to reflect on the ends of war; his intelligence is properly exercised only on ways and means.

In Book I, Achilles repudiates the military code of values. He does not do this in any coherent or cerebral manner. He reacts in an access of blind anger. His anger may be justified, for the honor he has already won has been taken away. And his behavior is consistent with the individualistic nature of heroic warfare, that is, he puts his own martial interest above the collective good. Yet his anger leads him further. He rejects war as the opportunity for personal glory. He implies a fundamental skepticism of the militarist's vision of the highest good when he argues that he does not have a vital *material* interest in the war: "never yet have the Trojans driven away my cattle . . . , never . . . did they spoil my harvest" (I., 154-156). In his rage, Achilles betrays that he has been questioning the rationale of heroic warfare. And that questioning constitutes a crisis of faith, as when a theologian wonders whether God really exists.

The *Iliad* is in part a roll of honor. Scores of good soldiers are named and then promptly killed by other good soldiers. The quick and the dead are both successful, though obviously not in equal measure; the vanquished are honored not only because they have demonstrated courage but because they have assented to the proposition that excellence, that highest value, must be paid for by losers. Sarpedon is explicit: a sensitive man, fully conscious of the pathos of the carnage raging around him, he yet affirms his conviction that not only is glory worth the price but that there is nothing else to buy with life:

But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
let us go and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.

(XII, 326-328)

Not all the model soldiers are so thoughtful. Aias, in a notable epic simile (XI, 556 ff.), is likened to a donkey who goes on eating grain despite the beatings of young boys. There is in Aias a commendable, donkey-like perseverance in battle. His commitment is total and irreversible. He never gives it a thought. (One may wonder whether he ever gives it any emotion; he seems to have an armored nervous system as well as an armored mind.)

Odysseus is not so much thoughtful as rational or shrewd. On one occasion, he counsels food before battle. During the rout, in Book II, he shows his administrative capability by rallying the men by threat or by persuasion, as the social proprieties demand. In Book X he conducts a spy mission and kills a prisoner of war for the most practical of reasons: dead men cause no trouble. He explains himself to the unlucky prisoner, who, we should note, has a name: 11

Do not, Dolon, have in your mind any thought of escape
now you have got in our hands, though you brought us an excellent message.
For if we let you get away now, or set you free later
you will come back again to the fast ships of the Achaians
either to spy on us once more, or to fight strongly with us.
But if, beaten down under my hands, you lose your life now,
then you will nevermore be an affliction upon the Argives.

(X, 447-454)

There is no tinge of sportsmanship here, unless it be of the sort that counsels "play to win." What is notable is that Odysseus never asks himself whether winning is worth the atrocity he is about to commit. Odysseus is a good soldier and a man of faith.

On the Trojan side, Hektor — surely one of the most reflective of warriors — knows the losses implied by the heroic code. He knows Troy is doomed. He knows what awaits his wife: "you must work at the loom of another, / and carry water . . . / all unwilling" (VI, 456-458). It is a pity that she must be sacrificed to his glory but glory is worth the price:

some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of you:
"This is the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter
of the Trojans, breakers of horses, in the days when they fought about Ilion."

(VI, 459-461)

And he wishes for his son a destiny as exalted as his own:

Then taking
up his dear son he tossed him about in his arms, and kissed him,
and lifted his voice in prayer to Zeus and the other immortals:
"Zeus, and you other immortals, grant that this boy, who is my son,
may be as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
great in strength, as am I, and rule strongly over Ilion;
and some day let them say of him: 'He is better by far than his father,'
as he comes in from the fighting; and let him kill his enemy
and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the heart of his mother."
(VI, 473-481)

These are proper heroes pursuing, with greater or lesser insight, excellence. Meanwhile, Achilles sulks unheroically in his tent. After Book I, he disappears from view and not until Book IX do we become aware of the crisis he is undergoing. We know that in Book I his anger has provoked him into utterances unbecoming to a soldier. But only when Agamemnon's emissaries go to him to entreat his help in battle does it become clear that he has been engaged in an agonized – and understandably confused – re-appraisal of everything he had once accepted without thought or question. The emissaries, on their part, seem to intuit Achilles' disenchantment with the military value system. For their appeals tend to recall him to the accepted code, to proper values.

Odysseus, cunning as always, seeks to arouse envy of Hektor who "in the huge pride of his strength rages irresistibly" (IX, 237-238). He arouses that ultimate competitiveness that is essential to heroic warfare. Then Odysseus invokes the moral authority of Peleus, Achilles' father. To withdraw is clearly a repudiation of the culture, as represented by Peleus. Then, veering sharply away from ideals, he cultivates Achilles' greed for the spoils of war. But in his peroration, Odysseus comes back to the central purpose of heroic endeavor: glory, honor, ego-fulfillment. He promises Achilles that "all the Achaians will honor you/as a god" (IX, 302-303).

Achilles, in his reply, rejects not only the offer but the whole moral world presumed by Odysseus. He repudiates the idea of honor: "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard./We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings" (IX, 318-319). Then he goes back on the heroic commitment. As Homer's audience knew, Achilles had rejected the long and ordinary life in favor of the brief and glorious career. Now he talks of giving up the pursuit excellence in favor of the pursuit of happiness. He talks of going home "to take wedded wife in marriage, the bride of my fancy" (IX,399), and though

"the excellence of my glory is gone . . . /there will be a long life left for me" (IX,415-416). As for the "meeds of honour," they are mere "things to be had for the lifting . . . /but a man's life cannot come back again, it cannot be lifted/nor captured again by force" (IX,406-409). It is as though he said the Congressional Medal of Honor can be bought in any pawnshop. "So he spoke, and all of them stayed stricken to silence/in amazement at his words" (IX, 430-431).

Phoinix then appeals to Achilles' filial love and duty. When Odysseus mentions Peleus, he is invoking an abstract idea. When Phoinix, the old family friend and foster father, speaks of Peleus, the appeal is intimate and charged with emotion. As it should be. For no choice of life can be full, can engage the full personality, if it is merely ratiocinative, if it ignores such grand imponderables as family connections and filial love. 13
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And Achilles is deeply affected. "Stop confusing my heart with lamentation and sorrow," he pleads (IX, 611). He can oppose no argument to this appeal and can only suggest that Phoinix stay the night and get his answer in the morning.

Aias, always a man of few words and never subtle, sees how very radical Achilles' position is. Ignoring Achilles, he says to Odysseus: "let us go. I think that nothing will be accomplished/by argument on this errand" (IX, 625-626). Not strangely, for Aias' utter disgust constitutes in itself a powerful emotional appeal, this comment provokes Achilles to betray the full confusion of his spirit. Now he says that instead of leaving for home next morning, he will wait until Hektor sets fire to the boats. Instead of going to Phthia to live a long life, he will remain and fight when the Greek position gets really desperate. Instead of risking his life for spoils and for the respect of his comrades, he will wait and fight later, after he has forfeited the spoils, some of the respect, and many of the comrades.

Now we should not conclude that Achilles is unbright. In fact, there is a certain logic in his behavior: He came to Troy to aggrandize his ego, that is, to win, by his courage and prowess, the adulation of his comrades (and of generations of soldiers to come). Now his comrades have wounded his ego. The same egotism that made him a hero leads him to take revenge on his comrades. But such perverse rationale notwithstanding, Achilles is clearly prey to the confusion of a man trying to make his own value system under conditions of great stress. He has decided, suddenly and under duress and for mainly emotional reasons, to be his own moral theoretician. It is right that a crisis provoke his attempt to redefine him-

self, for the self that is made or remade in the comfort, the security, the disinterested calm of the study is superficial, without roots set deeply in the whole person. But — an incidental irony of tragedy — the very crisis that leads to thought also confuses it.

Donkey-like Aias, unflappable Diomedes, cunning Odysseus — these men do not face moral questions. They know and have never doubted where the good life and the good death are to be found. They will kill when they can and die when honor says they must. They are therefore good soldiers. One can depend on them. In battle, one wants to be flanked by such comrades. But are they fully human? Did they with full consciousness choose their identities as good soldiers? Did they ever consider alternatives? Are they really savoring the richness and intensity of experience? Is the unexamined life really worth much in itself? Fate and chance, in their harshness, are kind to Achilles, for thanks to the accident of Agamemnon's insult and thanks to that mole in his own nature — his uncontrollable pride — Achilles can enjoy the anguish of choice.

Or the illusion of choice.

Eventually, Achilles will return to the soldier's way. He will accept the code. The Greeks will pay an enormous price in blood for his adventure in self-determination. Achilles will cause the death of his best friend. But when he finally, wearily, commits himself anew to the war that will glorify his name and kill him, he does so with an expanded vision and insight. He sees, finally, that he never had a chance to be anything but a gifted soldier fighting for honor and glory.

"Never to be cast away are the gifts of the gods, magnificent, no man could have them for wanting them," says Paris, in reply to Hektor's scornful remarks about Paris' woman-stunning beauty (III, 65-66). Paris, we know, is making a facile excuse for having seduced Helen. He is too shallow to know the full meaning of what he says. But Hektor knows that Paris' gift is his fate, and Hektor's, and Troy's.

And Achilles finds that the gifts of the gods are at best a mixed blessing. His gift is martial excellence. He is the only Greek capable of dealing with Hektor. But before killing Hektor, he hears from the mouths of his own horses that his own death must follow hard upon Hektor's; with full knowledge of the price of glory, he commits himself to the battle. Then, joyless in the contemplation of the perfect work he has accomplished, he joins sorrows with Hektor's father. Achilles says:

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 blessing. 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 evil hunger drives him over the shining earth,
and he wanders respected neither of gods nor mortals. (XXIV, 527-533)

Achilleus is not a failure but a success, Zeus' darling, the first soldier of the world, and a doomed, unhappy man whose bitter triumph is that he sees himself with burning clarity.

Weeping with dead Hektor's father, Achilleus thinks of his own father:

Priam, sat huddled
at the feet of Achilleus and wept close for manslaughtering Hektor
and Achilleus wept now for his own father. (XXIV, 509-511)

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For Peleus, like Priam, has been blessed with a son who excels, who is one of the greatest fighters of the world. (Hektor's wife knew the ambiguity of such greatness: "Your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity/on your little son, nor on me . . ." (IV, 407-408).) Several times Priam addresses Achilleus as "beloved of Zeus" while the beloved himself reflects bitterly, "I give [Peleus] /no care as he grows old, since far from the land of my fathers/I sit here in Troy, and bring nothing but sorrow to you and your children" (XXIV, 540-542).

Such knowledge of the rewards of excellence is possible only for someone who knows excellence absolutely and intimately — for someone like Achilleus, helpless in possession of a knowledge which of necessity comes too late. There is, in the terms offered by this work of art, only one possible escape clause in this antique Catch 22. That possible escape is the art work itself, wherein we contemplate the Gorgon harmlessly mirrored. Curiously, it is Helen, blessed with world-destroying beauty, who tells us this. She bemoans her gift and Hektor's, "us two, on whom Zeus set a vile destiny, so that hereafter/we shall be made into things of song for men of the future" (VI, 357-358).