
The ‘Premessa’ (5–7) of this short monograph announces C.’s aim to demonstrate that the behaviour of the heroes of the Iliad is not determined by ethical principles, and that, instead, heroes have limits in the sense that they have capabilities which they can fulfil, but if they try to perform beyond them they commit an error of judgment. This leads them to face situations of their own making which they cannot control. The consequences are to be viewed not as punishments for any moral fault but as the automatic re-establishment of order.

Chapter One, ‘L’Eroe e il riconoscimento del limite’ (9–11), identifies three stages in a pattern that repeats itself in the careers of Agamemnon, Hector and Achilles: the hero overestimates his capabilities, despite warnings of the risks; he gets into a situation he can no longer handle, and suffers the consequences; he explicitly recognises his error, though the damage is irretrievably permanent.

Chapter Two, ‘Ate’ (13–16), argues that θ’’s meaning is ‘blinding’, and that whether a distinction should be made for the ‘blinding’ sent by the gods or for that originating in another source is immaterial for the present study, since the actions of the heroes will be seen not to be necessarily the consequence of divine intervention. So Agamemnon can justifiably complain that he has been deceived by Zeus’ false dream, but Hector cannot say the same thing about Zeus’ guarantee of victory until the Achaean ships have been reached and the day ends (11. 191f).

In Chapter Three, ‘L’Errore dell’eroe’ (17–29), C. argues that, although the existence of a moral order in the Iliad cannot be denied, the heroes’ errors are not ethical, but consist only in the heroes’ venturing beyond their capabilities, which leads them into situations outside of their control. Apart from cases like ξείτι and oaths, there is no norm by which, for example, Chryses’ offer of ransom to Agamemnon could be considered adequate; and therefore Agamemnon’s rejection of it cannot be called immoderate. To be sure, C. admits, the court-scene on Achilles’ shield shows that the Iliad knows of justice administered by a body set up for the job, but he maintains that the state of war has made the administration of justice inapplicable in the Achaean camp. Nor is Menelaus’ dispute with Antilochus over the chariot-race amenable to any form of juridical settlement. Moreover, Zeus and the gods do not act on any ethical basis; for instance, Zeus’ acceptance of Thetis’ plea is motivated principally by gratitude.

Chapter Four, ‘Le Conseguenze dell’errore’ (31–3), restates C.’s argument that there is no causal nexus in the Iliad between crime and punishment, not even in the case of Apollo’s plague (for Agamemnon had simply taken on a force he hadn’t bargained with).

These preliminary chapters set down the principles for the remaining, more substantial discussions of Hector (Chapter Seven: 35–43), Agamemnon (Chapter Eight: 45–53) and Achilles (Chapter Nine: 55–74). Consequently, Hector is considered to have committed no moral injustice in his response to the bird-omen of Book Twelve, his misreading of Zeus’ guarantee of victory or his refusal to heed Polydamas’ good, tactical sense in Book Eighteen, where he simply makes a false judgment in thinking himself the equal of Achilles. Similarly, Agamemnon has no obligation to accept Chryses’ offer of ransom: even Chryses’ status as a suppliant is no guarantee, given the notorious regularity with which supplications are rejected on the battlefield, and what basis is there on which to settle disputes over the adequacy of ransom? Agamemnon’s only mistake, therefore, is his underestimation of Apollo. In his fatal dispute with Achilles, his error is only one of fact: he overestimates his own power and underestimates that of Achilles, in a dispute
over prestige in which questions of who is right and who is wrong have become all but irrelevant.

The longest chapter is naturally devoted to Achilles. It briefly examines the precarious balance of power between Achilles and Agamemnon, concluding that Agamemnon’s gifts are perfectly adequate for a reconciliation, and that Achilles’ decision to stay leaves him in a dilemma when the Trojans threaten the ships: he must either go back on his declaration not to rejoin the battle until the Trojans reach the ships of the Myrmidons and possibly risk forfeiting Agamemnon’s gifts, or he must let the Trojans burn the ships. His decision to reject Agamemnon’s gifts is therefore purely an error of fact. It leads to the death of Patroclus, but this cannot be said to be a divine punishment of Achilles’ error of judgment. And Achilles is now committed to fighting, and therefore to the early death announced in Thetis’ prophecy of ‘twofold dooms’. In this he is acting in perfect accord with the code of honour defined by Sarpedon, as C. interprets Sarpedon as saying: the hero is faced with death on the battlefield where it is certain, or away from it where it is not so immediate; Achilles, according to C., does not consider Agamemnon’s or any gifts sufficient compensation for facing certain death.

After Patroclus’ death Achilles acts in complete denial of the limits imposed on the human condition, finding his only insurmountable obstacle when he confronts the gods. It is this defiance of human limits alone which causes the anger of Scamander. C. does not see even the sacrifice of the twelve Trojan princes as a violation of a moral norm, for it is standard practice to throw enemy corpses to the dogs. The maltreatment of Hector’s corpse likewise involves no ethical fault; by performing it, Achilles has simply ignored the fact that he is maltreating the corpse of a human who had honoured the gods, and the gods are beyond Achilles’ control. When Achilles returns the body, he learns to respect his limitations.

A short Conclusion (75–7) summarises C.’s findings, and points to analogies in tragedy, especially the role of the ignored mediator.

All of this is argued out with extreme brevity, in itself a commendable quality. But in sticking so closely to his last C. cuts out too much of what the text of the Iliad actually says. This can be illustrated by C.’s analysis of Agamemnon’s treatment of Chryses.

The first fifty lines of the Iliad’s first book are in fact full of statements that prove that Agamemnon’s behaviour is morally offensive. Chryses is a supplicant (ἐλπιστός: 15), and suppliants should be respected; the fact that so many supplications are rejected in the course of the poem only shows how brutalised feelings have become, and throws Achilles’ acceptance of Priam’s supplication into deeper relief. Chryses asks the Achaeans to ‘revere’ Apollo (ἄνεξαίτως: 21), and they ask Agamemnon to ‘have shame before’/‘respect’ (οἴδησθαι: 23) the priest. Agamemnon does neither, but sends Chryses away ‘badly’ (κακοῖς: 25), and among other things says ‘Be careful lest the sceptre and the headbands of the god be of no avail to you’ (28), which demonstrates that Agamemnon knows that the priest’s trappings should command respect, and that he consciously flouts his obligation. It must be with some sense of moral outrage in mind, then, that Apollo is angry because Agamemnon ‘dishonoured’/took away the τοῦμ θρήων: 11) Chryses qua priest. C. asks what criterion was available to judge the adequacy of things like ransom and compensation; if there was none, Agamemnon is morally free, if factually mistaken, to accept or refuse Chryses’ ransom at whim. But there was a criterion to hand: this has been known for some time as the ‘appropriateness-standard’, and is seen in action in transactions like the notoriously inadequate exchange of armour between Diomedes and Glaucus, but also is invoked by Agamemnon himself when he complains that ‘it is inappropriate’ (οὐδὲ
šoike: 119) for him as king to go without a war-prize. Finally, there is such a thing as morally inappropriate self-assertion, as has been shown by C. J. Rowe in an important article unnoticed by C.  Much the same can be said of the argument between Agamemnon and Achilles over Briseis, where Athene agrees with Achilles in calling Agamemnon’s inappropriate self-assertion ἔμφρη (203, 214; ὑπερουλήρη at 205 is another significant term).

A crucial omission in C.’s discussion of the Embassy is Achilles’ statement that ‘The man who holds back has an equal lot to the man’s who fights hard; the lesser man (κακός) and the excellent man (μάχως) are held in the one honour (τιμή): the man who does nothing and the man who has done much both alike die’ (9. 318–21). And later: ‘Cattle and fat sheep can be taken for booty, tripods and gold-headed horses can be acquired; but a man’s life can be neither taken nor picked up to come back once it has passed over the teeth’s barrier’ (9. 426–9), which hardly predisposes Achilles to take up the early-death-with-glory option in his dual destiny. These lines fly in the face of C.’s contention that Achilles is acting in perfect accord with Sarpedon’s formulation of the heroic code in Book Twelve (lines 310–28). More importantly, what reason does Achilles now have for helping his community? Ethical considerations most assuredly figure in his decision not to accept Agamemnon’s gifts. The idea that Achilles is merely overestimating his hand hardly covers the facts of the text.

That said, I find C.’s arguments that the death of Patroclus is not presented as a punishment for Achilles’ rejection of the embassy quite persuasive. Likewise, I agree that Hector’s death isn’t to be seen as a punishment for his killing of Patroclus. Zeus’ pronouncement at Iliad 17. 201–8 that Hector’s donning of Achilles’ divine armour is οὐ κατὰ κοσμήν indeed suggests that Hector is committing an act above his mortal station, but the remark is subordinate to Zeus’ assessment that Hector has now fatally excited Achilles’ wish for vengeance, which C. is right to take as a natural response rather than a moral reprisal.

Are the gods of Iliad 24 really so impervious to moral claims and obligations? C. pays nowhere near enough attention to Apollo’s speech (33–54). The god urges his colleagues to let Hector’s family and community have the consolation of burying their son and champion, and this bespeaks kindly consideration for human feelings. Apollo’s words on Achilles’ behaviour employ terms of unmistakable moral condemnation: Achilles is acting like an wild animal, specifically a lion (λέον δ’ ὠς ἄγρα ὀδένε: 41), and has thus ‘destroyed’/‘lost pity’ (ἔλεος), and is showing no ‘respect’ (τιμή: 44); his behaviour is no longer ἄλλων nor ὄμνων, i.e. not befitting an ἄγαθός; and ‘for all that he is an ἄγαθός, let him be careful lest we grow indignant with him’ (νέμουσαθέομεν οἴ). This latter statement demonstrates the sense of νέμους, ‘indignation’, where one believes that another person isn’t acting up to the expectations entertained of him, here those of an ἄγαθός, a person, like Achilles, high in social rank and therefore moral standing who is acting beneath himself. Achilles is in fact acting like a lion, and is not laying aside his grief for a mere friend when people do so in the case of much.

more important figures in their life, like a brother or a son. The sense of νέμωνις is clearly a moral curb on inappropriate self-assertion. Consequently, Apollo is indeed bringing Achilles to book when he requires the ransom of Hector’s body.

Further, Zeus clearly does act morally in the final analysis, reconciling the claims of both Apollo and Hera, accepting Hera’s point about Achilles’ superior τιμή as the son of a goddess, but agreeing with Apollo’s assessment of Hector’s piety and telling Thetis of his particular anger at Achilles’ failure to ransom Hector’s corpse. And Achilles will show respect and pity to Priam in fullest measure, and will respond morally and in total obedience to the institution of supplication after all his cruelty.¹

C. states that he isn’t excluding a moral order from the Iliad. However, I hope to have shown that in his own examples there are subcurrents which have an immediately recognisable and significant moral force. They have direct bearing on C.’s individual analyses and his overall thesis. The problem with such a concise treatment is that it leaves a great deal unsaid that ought to be said. The same is true of the ‘Appendice bibliografica’ (79–85), to which in the interests of brevity C. relegates the secondary literature on his major points: the lists of items too often fail to differentiate between the divergences of approach and opinion that the individual items offer on the same subject, and ultimately serve only to show how much scholarly opinion C. should have engaged with more deeply.

I hope to have shown that I believe C.’s premiss is correct on some points, but I think it should by now be clear that a general rule can’t be extrapolated from the cases where C. is right. However, the book has an interesting thesis and some useful analyses of individual matters, for example the discussion of Agamemnon’s need to get Achilles to admit that he is ἴδιος (57–9; but aren’t we here addressing another ethical concept – loyalty?).

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¹ I argue this point in detail in my chapter Beyond Reciprocity: The Akhilleus-Priam Scene in Ἰλιάδ 24, in C. Gill et al. (edd.), Reciprocity in Ancient Greece, Oxford 1998, 73–92.