

## The Virtues of Achilles

Commentators have reached different conclusions regarding how Achilles changes—if he does so—over the course of the *Iliad*. In a much-quoted article, Adam Parry (Parry 1956, 1-7) argues that Achilles comes to dissent from the shared morals and values of his society, although he lacks the vocabulary to express his new sense of disillusionment. Cedric Whitman (Whitman 1958, 181-220) argues that Achilles begins the poem sharing the morals and values of heroic society but gradually—and through the full acceptance of his imminent death—comes closer than ever before “to a real communion with his fellows.” In this talk, I wish to look at the evolution of Achilles from the perspective of the virtues he exercises before and during the course of the poem—not from the perspective of what he learns, what he does, or what he does differently. As far as methodology is concerned, I adopt a “virtue ethics” approach to an understanding of Achilles.

Virtue ethics is, of course, at least as old as Aristotle—and Aristotle will be essential to my argument. In modern moral philosophy, a virtue ethics approach to morality asks us to view morality without regard to the actions to which it gives rise (Russell 2013, 1-2)—again, not a particularly new idea. Virtue ethics, ancient and modern, asks us to view virtues as those character traits that are necessary to the living of a fulfilling human life. This talk argues that Achilles is living a fulfilling human life according to the lights of his society before the poem begins and in its early stages, and that the attainment of a fulfilling life at the poem’s end calls for the exercise of a virtue he acquires only gradually. Specifically, I argue that the Achilles we see before the poem begins—in glimpses of his character provided us by the narrator and others—is a hero whose actions spring from what Aristotle calls *sophrosyne* (temperance). *Sophrosyne* is the virtue of one so constituted as to take no pleasure in things that are contrary to

principle. This is the virtue we see exercised early by Achilles, who allows a proper burial to Andromache's father Eetion, whom he killed at the sack of Thebe before the poem begins (VI.414ff.). The Achilles we see at the end of the poem, however, is a man whose character can be defined in terms of the possession of Aristotelian *enkrateia*, the quality of character that restrains one from giving in to evil passions (*NE* VII. ix). Achilles eventually allows Hector to be given a proper burial; however, he must overcome the anger that leads him to threaten to kill old Priam (XXIV. 559ff.) In other words, Achilles allows the proper burial of Hector as he did in the case of Eetion, but the virtues giving rise to much the same *actions* on these two occasions are quite different. Homer, I conclude, bestows special praise on the Achilles who exercises *enkrateia* at the poem's conclusion. Nietzsche was thinking along the same lines in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, when he praised the man of power who exercises kindness as his final self-conquest.

#### Bibliography

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