Silencing Conscience: Killing and Neutralization in the *Iliad*

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Abstract

What does it take, morally and psychologically, to kill and harm others? This article argues that committing deadly violence against others requires that we repress our basic moral understanding of them and neutralize the moral significance of our actions. Indeed, it proposes that violence and evil in general are not possible without self-deception and bad faith. I use "neutralization" as a generic term for the psychological techniques we use to cover up the moral corruption of our destructive behaviors, such as dehumanizing others or denying our responsibility. Understanding neutralization as a repression of our moral understanding sheds new light on the moral-psychological dynamics of neutralization, for example, its ambivalent character, its tendency to escalate, and its self-dehumanizing nature. Moreover, the account of neutralization developed in the article provides the vantage point for a reading of the *Iliad* that explores the motives that drive the slaughter outside the walls of Troy, and the various psychological strategies employed by the warriors to neutralize the killing. My account of neutralization and my reading of the *Iliad* are developed in critical dialogue with Simone Weil's classic essay on the Greek epic and her reflections on dehumanization in general.

1. Introduction

For most people, killing and doing violence to others is difficult. Even in situations of collectively sanctioned killing, with institutional and ideological structures propagating the legitimacy of deadly violence, human beings tend to feel a deep resistance to killing others (Collins 2008; Grossman 1995; Marshall 1947).

And yet, we do it.

Why is killing difficult, even when collectively applauded and demanded? And what does it mean, morally and psychologically, to overcome this difficulty?

In this article, I make the argument that we humans are generally open to the existential reality of others, so that we cannot fail to be touched by them and to recognize their moral significance and claim on us. For this reason, hurting others is difficult and requires that we neutralize and cover up the nature of what we are doing, for example, by dehumanizing the other or denying our responsibility. Indeed, I want to propose that there is no such thing as morally clear-sighted violence and evil, and that hurting and killing others always entails self-dehumanization and self-deception.

In the following, I will develop these suggestions and use them as a vantage point for discussing killing and neutralization in Homer's classic war epic, the *Iliad*. I will elaborate my thoughts against the background of, and in critical dialogue with, Simone Weil's famous essay on the epic and her view of dehumanization in general.

Here is the structure. Having introduced Weil's philosophical viewpoint, I outline my account of how violence and evil require us to repress our moral understanding of our actions. Following the usage in social psychology, I will use neutralization as a generic term for the psychological techniques we use to deny the moral significance of our destructive behaviors. The rest of the article is devoted to exploring how the slaughter of the Trojan War is described and neutralized in the *Iliad*.[1]

2. Weil and the Iliad

Weil insists that the basic reality of moral life is that the other human being encounters us as someone sacred and absolutely precious, as someone who calls for our love and respect (HP: 70–72).[2] Indeed, the other human being and

[1] In the general parts of the article, I will use female pronouns to refer to people of unspecified gender. When discussing the *Iliad*, I will use masculine pronouns. Although the article focuses on contexts of war that are predominantly masculine, its basic account of neutralization is intended to be gender-neutral. We should be aware, however, that the particular forms of neutralization used in different contexts might exhibit significant gendered differences.

[2] The works by Weil referred to in the text are abbreviated as follows: "Are We Struggling for Justice?" (AWS); *Gravity and Grace* (GG); "Human Personality" (HP); "The *Iliad* or the Poem of Force" (IPF); *The Need for Roots* (NR).

her vital needs are the ultimate and sole source of moral obligations (NR: 5–7).

However, according to Weil, relating to others with love is exceedingly difficult. Evil and destruction flood human history and the present. Why? Why is it that we violate and kill each other to the horrifying extent that we do?

Weil submits that there are powerful motives in us that make us dehumanize others and view them as mere things, things that we can then exploit, violate, and kill without qualms. In her essay on the *Iliad*, she focuses on the dehumanizing nature of what she calls "force". "Force," she writes, "is that which makes a thing of whoever submits to it. Exercised to the extreme, it makes the human being a thing quite literally, that is, a dead body" (IPF: 45).[3] By "force", Weil essentially means the experience of power and might over others. She claims that when in the grip of a sense of power over others, we come to perceive the other as a mere object that lacks human qualities, and that it is possible for us to mistreat or kill without hesitation or regret. In other writings, Weil broadens her analysis of the dehumanizing attitude to include all desires and motives that make us relate to others as objects or instruments that may satisfy or hamper the desires in question. "Gravity" is her umbrella term for these motives, which include our desire for collective esteem and power, our drive for survival, our fears and pains (GG: 1–4, 164–169).

Importantly, Weil emphasizes that experiencing and exercising force in relation to others dehumanizes both the victim and the perpetrator: "Such is the character of force. Its power to transform beings into things is twofold and operates on two fronts; in equal but different ways, it petrifies the souls of those who undergo it and those who ply it." Both become "mute or deaf" (IPF: 61). The one who wields force sees the other as an object to control and, if needed, to kill. In the process, she herself becomes dehumanized in that she loses her sense both of the other as a human being and of herself as a vulnerable creature capable of reflection and compassion. Furthermore, the person subjected to force tends to get petrified, and lose her ability to think, respond, and act (IPF: 46–50).

Weil reads the *Iliad* as a supremely insightful portrayal of the workings of dehumanizing force in the Trojan War, and, by extension, in life in general: "The true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad* is force" (IPF: 45). The poem illuminates what happens when force comes to prevail in a

[3] On Weil's conception of force, see, e.g., Dietz (1988: 86–90); Levy (2020); Winch (1989:147–163).

situation of war (for Weil, the *Iliad* is a mirror of the war that was her lived reality when she wrote her essay in 1939), such that the warriors on both sides relentlessly transform each other – and themselves – into objects and corpses: "Someone was there and, the next moment, no one. The *Iliad* never tires of presenting us this tableau" (IPF: 45).

According to Weil, the poetic vision of the *Iliad* is honest and morally astute. The brutality of the bloodshed is depicted unadulterated. Moreover, the depictions are illuminated by a perspective of love and justice, which allows the poem to lay bare the terrible human loss and suffering that war and killing cause to those involved. In this, Achaeans (also called Danaans or Argives by Homer) and Trojans are portrayed as thoroughly equal.

> Justice and love, totally out of place in this depiction of extremes and unjust violence, subtly and by nuance, drench all with their light. Nothing of value, whether doomed to die or not, is slighted; the misery of all is revealed without dissimulation or condescension; no man is set above or below the common human condition; all that is destroyed is regretted. (IPF: 64)

In addition to the above, Weil claims that a pivotal teaching of the *Iliad* concerns the uncontrollable and inescapable reign of force in human life. According to Weil, the warriors wielding force tend to become intoxicated by the sense that they own it and control it. But this is an illusion. What the *Iliad* demonstrates, Weil claims, is that nobody can possess or control force, and that every human is bound sooner or later to become the victim of its destructive power. However, this aspect of Weil's reading will fall outside the scope of this article.

3. Love, morality, and neutralization: an outline

In what follows, I outline a perspective on neutralization as a repression of our moral understanding of others. The perspective is developed through general descriptions of the moral and psychological dynamics that characterize the experience and attitude of neutralization. Later, I will demonstrate the ability of this account to shed light on the moral psychology of the *Iliad*. The explanatory power and scope of the account will necessarily remain open. What I offer is a guiding perspective that will need to be probed and nuanced through further investigations of different situations.

Elsewhere, I have developed an account of moral understanding as centrally constituted by our loving concern for others (Westerlund 2022a, b).[4] This is the backdrop for my present thoughts.

Fundamentally, I agree with Weil that the other human being encounters us as sacred and as the ultimate source of moral normativity, and further that our moral understanding centrally consists in attending to and loving the other (AWS: 4). However, my account also deviates from and critically develops Weil's view in some crucial ways.

I want to propose that it is a fact of life that we humans are fundamentally open to the existential and moral reality of others. In the presence of another person, we cannot fail, at some level, to sense and be touched by her as a living subject who is open to us and the world, and who overflows with life, significance, sensitivity. The other human being, by her very presence, appeals to our love and concern. Love, in the basic sense I give this word, means recognizing the moral weight and significance of the other by opening up to and caring about her as this singular living subject, this You.

Considered as our very recognition of the reality of the other person – rather than a blind affective reaction – love is essential to moral understanding. Without love, we would have no grasp of the moral significance of others. It is love, thus understood, which opens up moral meaning and normativity, and which gives the guiding concern and light to all subsequent moral reasoning, evaluation, and action.

Barring the alleged possibility of radical psychopathy, we are always fundamentally open to the moral reality of others and to the appeal and demand to relate to them with love. Because of this basic moral understanding, people in general feel a strong resistance to hurting or killing others. We know and feel the weight of the damage we would inflict on them and the moral corruption of forsaking them. As Levinas puts it, the face of the other signifies "you shall not commit murder" (1969: 199).

Still, there are motives in us that push us towards harming and killing others. To do this, we need to overcome our moral understanding of them. We

[4] My perspective has been influenced by a set of philosophers who emphasize the second personal relation to others and love as fundamental to morality, e.g. Buber, Levinas, Løgstrup, and Weil. Crucially, my thinking has developed through extensive dialogue with colleagues and friends with a similar approach, especially Backström (2007), Nykänen (2002), and Toivakainen (2023).

need, in one way or the other, to neutralize our understanding of what we are doing.

Weil offers two important insights into the nature of this kind of neutralization. First of all, she suggests that dehumanization of others (the capacity of force to make us view others as things) is part and parcel of all evil action (our transforming others into corpses) and that the former conditions the latter. Moreover, she insists that dehumanization of others essentially involves dehumanizing oneself. However, I also believe Weil's account of dehumanization is misleading in some important respects.

The fundamental problem with Weil's view, as I see it, is that it fails to recognize the basic relationship and tension between the perspective of love and the motives and attitudes that inhibit that perspective.

Weil's use of mechanistic metaphors such as "gravity" and "force" to signify the dehumanizing motives at work in us is not accidental. In essence, she presents these motives – hunger for esteem, sense of power, thirst, fear, and so on – as innate forces that, by themselves and without friction, cause us to see others as pure lifeless objects, objects that we therefore have no problem killing (IPF: 48; AWS: 2). In so far as such motives stir in us, they make us view and relate to others as mere things. In this, Weil denies that we would always already be open to others as beings who call for and awaken our love. Instead, the dehumanizing gaze of gravity is pictured as our default attitude. By contrast, she depicts genuine love and attention to the other as a rare and difficult possibility that may or may not materialize. Ultimately, it requires that we purge ourselves of the motives of gravity and open ourselves to love and attention as a grace.

However, I believe this kind of account is distortive both of the drivers of human violence and of the nature of neutralization.

It seems that our hostility and violence towards others is generally based on our recognizing them as human beings who mean something to us, and whom we can therefore find hateful, deserving of violence, threatening, et cetera. If, following Weil, we saw others as mere objects or instruments, we would have no motive for hurting them, or for doing much else for that matter.[5] Arguably,

[5] Regarding Weil's notion of force in particular, I find her idea that our sense of power over others in itself entails dehumanization confusing. It seems that knowing that one has power over others does not in itself imply dehumanization or hostility. For example, a parent's sense of power over her child does

one of the main motivations for interhuman violence and killing is found in the human drive for social recognition.[6] This drive is at the root of many hostile and potentially violent emotions and desires, including hatred, rage, ressentiment, desire for revenge, and hunger for power. Such affective stances largely tend to be ways of defending or asserting our social worth and self-esteem.

Furthermore, contrary to Weil, I want to suggest that neutralization and dehumanization are essentially related to the perspective of love and must be understood in terms of a repression of the latter.

As Weil sees it, our default stance is one of frictionless dehumanization of others. According to this view, abusing and killing others should, especially in the context of war, be easy and painless. Moreover, there should be no need for dehumanization or neutralization as a distinct additional act of repression and dissimulation. However, this appears to be a misconstrual of the existential reality of violence.

There seems to be compelling evidence both for the moral-psychological difficulty of lethal violence, even in war and other comparable settings, and for the psychological need for strategies of neutralization. My suggestion is that it is precisely our basic openness to and moral understanding of others that explains the necessity for and motivates neutralization. Given this understanding, harming or killing others is something we do not want to do and the true moral reality of which we find unbearable. Thus, when harming others, we experience an urgent need to repress and deny our moral understanding of the situation. It is precisely because, at bottom, we understand the moral meaning of what we are doing, that we must blind ourselves to what we know and feel. Indeed, I submit that neutralization is an essential part – not just a possible aspect – of the evil we do to each other, and

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not imply such an attitude. It is another thing to actually desire to control and exercise power over others in an oppressive way. However, such a desire for power cannot be understood in terms of pure objectification, but already presupposes recognizing the other as human.

[6] Cf. Westerlund (2019, 2022a) for my account of how our drive for recognition underpins shame and other self-conscious emotions. In my view, it is critical that we distinguish between love – as I understand it – and the drive for recognition. Whereas love, in the sense of our openness to and concern for others, is constitutive of moral understanding, the drive for recognition is egocentrically concerned with our own social value. I propose that the desire for recognition is ultimately motivated by our longing for love and connection; however, by focusing on and seeking to control our value in the eyes of others, it actually blocks and distorts the possibility of love.

that there is no such thing as perspicacious evil that is aware of its own moral corruption.

There are many neutralization strategies,[7] and this is not the place for a thorough inventory. I will just indicate the domain by mentioning the five basic strategies listed by Sykes and Matza in their classic 1957 article on the subject[8]: (1) denial of responsibility (the subject conceives of her actions as due to internal or external forces beyond her control, e.g., her upbringing, her temperament); (2) denial of injury (the subject denies that anyone is harmed by her actions, e.g., by creating distance from their effects); (3) denial of the victim (the subject denies the moral claim or reality of the victim, e.g., by conceiving the victim as subhuman or as deserving of violence); (4) condemning the condemners (the subject rejects those who pass judgment as corrupt, unjust, hypocritical); (5) appeal to higher norms or loyalties (the subject denies the norms that censure her actions, or she appeals to higher norms or loyalties that legitimize them; e.g., she may think of herself as violating others for the sake of the fatherland, her honor, or the greater good).[9]

As for denial of the victim, I think it is fair to say that all neutralization involves such denial in the basic negative sense of refusing to acknowledge the moral claim of the other. When it comes to conceptions that negate the moral significance of the other, they can be of many kinds. At one extreme, we have conceptions that view others as radically nonhuman or subhuman. In the literature on dehumanization, the key term "dehumanization" is mostly

[7] When I speak of "techniques" or "strategies" of neutralization, this is not meant to imply that neutralization is a matter of consciously implementing one technique or another. Rather, as with all self-deception, we adopt a falsifying perspective without being fully aware of what we are doing. Moreover, we can appropriate and normalize the viewpoints of neutralization so that they become our habitual way of seeing things.

[8] Since the publication of Sykes and Matza (1957), a number of other neutralization techniques have been explored (cf. Maruna & Copes 2005; Kaptein & van Helvoort 2019). For a study of how the techniques reviewed by Sykes & Matza have been used to neutralize killing in war, see Kooistra & Mahoney (2016).

[9] Neutralization research by sociologists and social psychologists tends to assume naturalistic framework. Mostly, the difficulty of killing and violence, and the psychological need for neutralization, is explained in terms of the difficulty of deviating from "the social norms, beliefs, and values with which people are inculcated" (Kooistra & Mahoney 2016: 764). In contrast, I propose that we humans have a basic moral sensitivity to others that is fundamentally different from adherence to prevailing social norms. In fact, I propose that conforming to social norms in order to gain recognition and avoid shame has nothing to do with morality, but is in tension with it (cf. Westerlund 2022a, b; Bauman 1989). As I hope to show, acknowledging our basic moral understanding of others allows us to explain why lethal violence is universally difficult (regardless of whether one's group norms justify it) and to shed new light on the moral-psychological dynamics of neutralization.

reserved for such conceptions, paradigmatically exemplified in contexts of genocide, slavery, and racism (Kronfeldner 2021). Beyond these particular academic contexts, however, the term tends to be used broadly as a generic term covering all kinds of denials of the moral significance of others. In addition to literally dehumanizing conceptions of others, there are many ways of denying the moral reality of the other without classifying her as nonhuman. In what follows, I will focus in particular on what might be called depersonalization, by which I mean conceiving of the other in terms of impersonal roles or functions at the expense of relating to her with love as this singular You whom I encounter when our eyes meet.

As said, the psychological strategies we use for neutralization are all different ways of repressing the perspective of love and moral understanding. This explains some of the characteristic features of the phenomenon.

First, because we know or sense deep down that the other is a human being who cries out for our love and care, our techniques of neutralization are never perfect or stable. Rather, at some level we are always haunted by the voice of conscience, which is nothing other than our repressed moral understanding of the other. The voice of conscience appeals to the possibility of remorse, that is, to the possibility of again opening up with love to the reality of the other and to the reality of what I have done to her.

Second, to the extent that neutralization takes the form of denying or dehumanizing the victim, the other will always be present behind the dehumanizing image. Contrary to Weil's descriptions, it seems that no matter how much we dehumanize the other, we will not perceive her as a stone or as a thoroughly inhuman creature. Rather, it is precisely the double character of the other as both human and nonhuman that accounts for our typically ambivalent affective responses to her: our emotionally charged denial and indifference, our accusatory anger and lust for revenge, our hatred and disgust.[10]

[10] My argument relates to what has been called the "paradox of dehumanization". As Smith (2021) puts it: "Dehumanizers do not simply think of those whom they dehumanize as really subhuman. Instead, they think of them as human and subhuman simultaneously" (359). The main argument behind this paradox is that dehumanizers typically exhibit resentful, punitive, or hateful attitudes toward the dehumanized, attitudes that make sense only as reactions to human beings. In my view, there are actually three dimensions to distinguish. First, there is our loving understanding of the moral reality of the other as this singular person. Second, there are various hostile attitudes in which we see the other as, for example, hateful or deserving of punishment. Although we here recognize the other as human, we relate

Third, to the extent that we persist in dehumanizing the person we have violated, she will be apt to haunt us as a terrible presence, a witness and a reminder of the evil we have done to her. This seems to be a reason for the tendency of dehumanizing practices to escalate. Being confronted with the people we have wronged and dehumanized can, if we do not choose remorse, easily create an impulse to dehumanize them even more or to annihilate them as dreadful witnesses to the evil we have committed.

Finally, in line with Weil, it is crucial to see that neutralization always involves a kind of self-dehumanization. Neutralization and dehumanization tend to be discussed primarily as strategies for denying others and for concealing the evil we do to them. But the repressive character of neutralization also makes it essentially self-dehumanizing. What I mean by this is that by neutralizing the perspective of love, we blind ourselves to and refuse to take responsibility for our own deepest moral-existential insight and will. We refuse to open ourselves to others and to the moral reality before us; we refuse to acknowledge our own good will. In short, to the extent that we engage in neutralization of our destructive behavior, moral corruption, self-deception, and alienation will be our lot.[11]

The focus of this text is on brutal violence and killing. However, it is important to understand that these extreme forms of aggression are continuous with, and modifications of, motives, attitudes, and actions that are present throughout everyday life. The motives that incline us to repress love and to relate to others in manipulative, hostile, depersonalizing, and neutralizing ways are perpetual and powerful temptations in all our human relationships. Indeed, the challenge of relating to others with love and openness is every day's moral challenge – and a very difficult challenge at that.

to her in a depersonalizing manner in terms of her function in our affective economy. Third, there is the dehumanizing gaze that strips the other of her moral standing as a human being.

[11] As far as I know, Weil's insight that dehumanization of others implies self-dehumanization has not been duly acknowledged in the literature on dehumanization. Others who have pointed to this phenomenon are Arendt (1963), Baldwin (1990), and Sartre (1995). In dehumanization studies, the term "self-dehumanization" has primarily been used to refer to what happens when perpetrators or targets of dehumanization begin to conceive of themselves as subhuman (see Kronfeldner 2021: 10). By contrast, Weil's – and my – concept of self-dehumanization as a kind of self-blinding and self-alienation does not imply that the dehumanizer entertains this sort of dehumanizing conception of herself.

4. Light and shadow in Weil's reading

Weil depicts the *Iliad* as a truthful and compassionate rendering of the workings of force in the Trojan war. She insists that the *Iliad* is a pure tragedy that never glamorizes the war but offers an honest picture of its horror (IPF: 64–65).

In my view, Weil's reading is simultaneously sharply illuminating and blinding. With unparalleled moral sensitivity, it highlights the love and compassion that guide the gaze of the epic, allowing it to depict the infinite loss and sorrow that the war brings to those killed and assaulted, and to their loved ones. Moreover, unlike most other war epics, the *Iliad* treats both sides of the war as equals – or, at least, as fairly equal[12] – sharing the basic challenges and sufferings of life. However, as we shall see and contrary to what Weil suggests, the *Iliad* fundamentally affirms and celebrates the honor morality and the warrior virtues that manifest in the war and the killing.

Weil's explication of how dehumanizing force operates and produces killing in the *Iliad* points to key issues and contains important insights. But it also has its limitations. Weil does not offer a thorough analysis of the motives that drive the killing and the various neutralization strategies employed. Moreover, the problems in her general account of dehumanizing force – especially her failure to recognize dehumanization and neutralization as repressions of love – makes her inclined to misinterpret the nature and dynamics of neutralization in the epic.

5. Why war? On honor and revenge

Let us have a look at the motives and reasons that provoke the war and propel the killing outside the walls of Troy.

The main factor motivating collective and individual action in the *Iliad* is the ethics of honor governing the heroic world.[13] Honor – *timê* – denotes the way one is valued in the eyes of one's community. The esteem of the

[12] In fact, there are some systematic differences between the *Iliad*'s portrayal of the Achaeans – the perceived ancestors of the poet and the primary audience – and the Trojans. Whereas the Achaean warriors are portrayed as somewhat more heroically pure and magnificent, the Trojans are depicted as somewhat more vacillating and impure in their motivations. Note also that the common foot soldiers who made up the bulk of the armies are barely mentioned, and when they are, they are treated with contempt by the heroes and the poet (*Iliad* 2.197–270).

[13] For two succinct accounts of the role of honor in Homeric society, cf. Hammer (2002): 58–65; Allan (2012): 35–47. For more thorough studies, see Cairns (1993); Williams (1993); Scodel (2008).

community is manifested in many ways, for example, through grants of land, luxuries, war booty.

The heroic world is a strictly hierarchical one. It is a world in which people are born into – or have acquired – hierarchically ordered social identities or roles, which are the basis of their status within their community. These social identities come with distinct values, norms and demands that the person in question needs to live up to in order to demonstrate that he is worthy of the honor and esteem he enjoys. If he fails, his status is undermined, and he plummets into shame and disgrace.

The heroes of the poem all belong to the highest end of the status hierarchy. They are the *agathoi*, the nobles, who enjoy a superior position of power and status in their communities. This social position comes with the demand that the warriors demonstrate *aretê*, that is, excellences appropriate to their status, in particular, courage, skill in fighting, and good counsel.

In addition to honor, the warriors are concerned with glory (*cleos* or *kudos*). Whereas honor is the esteem manifested by the community in this life, glory is the way the hero is spoken of not just in his lifetime but also after his death.

A feature of the honor ethic that is central to the war is the demand on the heroes to protect the honor of their peers and themselves when it is defiled through the actions of others. This happens by exacting revenge or compensation. So, if a comrade in arms is killed by the enemy, the hero is expected to defend the honor of the comrade and himself by taking vengeance and killing the perpetrator.

How did the war begin? The basic narrative framing the events of the *Iliad* is familiar enough. Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, is abducted by, or elopes with, the Trojan prince Paris, son of King Priam and brother of Hector. In response, an army is assembled under the command of Menelaus' brother, King Agamemnon. A host of Achaean kings and nobles join the expedition along with their armies. They sail to Troy and lay siege to the city.

A salient reason for the war is the desire of the Achaeans to defend their honor – which has been dealt a collective blow by Paris' abduction of Helen – by exacting revenge through capturing and ravaging Troy and taking back Helen. Moreover, the Achaean nobles volunteer in order to demonstrate and strengthen the bonds of loyalty to other powerful princes and to acquire booty in the form of wealth and slaves. Finally, the Trojan War is a principal occasion

for the warriors to prove that they deserve their honor and to achieve immortal glory. In a telling passage, Sarpedon addresses Glaucus thus:

> […] Glaucus,
> why do they hold us both in honor, first by far
> with pride of place, choice meats and brimming cups,
> in Lycia where all our people look on us like gods?
> […]
> So that now the duty's ours –
> we are the ones to head our Lycian front,
> brace and fling ourselves in the blaze of war,
> so a comrade strapped in combat gear may say,
> "Not without fame, the men who rule in Lycia,
> these kings of ours who eat fat cuts of lamb
> and drink sweet wine, the finest stock we have.
> But they owe it all to their own fighting strength –
> our great men of war, they lead our way in battle!" (12.310–21)

Besides being the motive that elicits the war, honor is the main motive that incites the heroes throughout the poem. Again and again, the warriors appeal to their honor and glory as the key concerns for the sake of which they strive to overcome their fear and their reluctance to kill, and push themselves into combat with the enemy.

The ancient ethics of honor is a social morality that in many respects differs from contemporary Westerns values and norms. However, it is important to see that this ethics is centrally grounded in a universal human motive, namely, the drive for social recognition. The honor ethic is a specific cultural form (characterized by preestablished social hierarchies, comparatively strict codes of honor, and public social roles demanding public enactment) for distributing and managing recognition and esteem. Today, the forms of sociality and the values and norms determining social recognition are largely different. However, the drive for recognition is still as strong as ever. Then as now, it is at the root of our feelings of self-esteem and shame, and one of the main determinants of human behavior. Then as now, it is one of the principal motives for repressing the possibility of love and moral understanding, and for resorting – as defensive self-assertion – to hostility and violence against others.

6. The presence of love

As Weil rightly points out, the *Iliad* is not just a heartless pitch-dark exhibition of brutal violence and killing: "A tedious gloom would ensue were there not scattered here and there some moments of illumination – fleeting and sublime moments when man possesses a soul" (IPF: 62). What gives to the *Iliad* its moral light and perceptiveness is the basic and continuous presence of the perspective of love. This perspective is first and foremost part of the narrator's point of view. It guides the descriptions of the loss and grief implied by the death of individual warriors, and it is present in the scenes of love and tenderness between the characters, which provide a contrast to the slaughter on the battlefield: love between friends and lovers, love between wife and husband, love between parents and children (IPF: 62–64).

On a few rare occasions, the warriors themselves are faced with the tension between their compassion for the enemy and the imperative of honor and war to kill the person in question. At the point where Menelaus has Adrestus in his power and is ready to slay him, Adrestus hugs Menelaus's knees and begs him to spare his life. Adrestus' pleas "move the heart of Menelaus" (6.51). However, just as Menelaus is about to hand Adrestus to an aide to take him back to the Achaean ships, Agamemnon, Menelaus' brother, intervenes:

> "So soft, dear brother, why?
> Why such concern for enemies? I suppose you got
> such tender loving care at home from the Trojans.
> Ah would to god not one of them could escape
> his sudden plunging death beneath our hands!
> No baby boy still in his mother's belly,
> not even he escape – all Ilium blotted out,
> no tears for their lives, no markers for their graves!"
> And the iron warrior brought his brother round –
> rough justice, fitting too.
> Menelaus shoved Adrestus back with a fist,
> powerful Agamemnon stabbed him in the flank
> and back on his side the fighter went, faceup. (6.55–65)

In the epic, this is an exceptional moment of hesitation, of unresolved tension between the possibility of love and the pressure to kill. However, having lasted only a few seconds, the hesitation is gone and Adrestus is ruthlessly put to death. Moreover, the *Iliad* affirms the decision, calling it "just" or "fitting".

However, despite the rarity of such moments in the epic, they are crucial since they point to the ever-present possibility of love and compassion as something that radically challenges what is going on and must be overcome in order for the killing to be possible. Indeed, the scene above contradicts Weil's analysis of force as something that frictionlessly makes us relate to others as inanimate objects that can be erased. According to Weil's account, Menelaus' having Adrestus in his power and moreover being motivated to kill him by the codes of honor and war, should be a paradigmatic case of the irresistibility of dehumanizing force. However, Menelaus stays his hand. Why? Because he is open to Adrestus and allows his heart to be moved by the other's pleas, despite the motives of war that beat within him. But Agamemnon also does not treat Adrestus simply as a meaningless thing. Rather, it is precisely the accessibility of love's point of view that makes it necessary for Agamemnon to declare, in a fit of depersonalizing rage, that the violence is just and deserved. Had Agamemnon truly perceived Adrestus as a mere thing, no such neutralizing justifications or affects would have been required.

7. Neutralization strategies

How is the killing neutralized in the *Iliad*? I see three main strategies employed.

7.1. Appeal to higher norms and loyalties

First of all, the heroes of the *Iliad* continually appeal to the ethic of honor as the normative framework that drives and justifies the war and the killing. Again and again, they invoke the demands of honor, the imperative of revenge, and the prospect of glory as superior and unquestionable norms and ideals that justify the carnage and allow them to disregard all compassion and moral openness toward the enemy. In the case of the ruthless killing of Adrestus, we witness how the appeal to the demand for revenge works to repress and cover up the demands of love. Most of the time, however, the neutralizing standpoint – along with other neutralization strategies – dominates the gaze of the warriors so habitually and completely that the perspective of love is not permitted to surface at all.

7.2. Depersonalization

Another central strategy of neutralization is the propensity of the heroes to depersonalize the enemy.

To begin with, depersonalization is part and parcel of the warriors' overriding tendency of the to see each other in terms of their impersonal roles in the game of honor: the avenger, the one to be avenged, the revered father, the competitor for glory, the comrade in arms. To the extent that this kind of stance dominates our attitude to others, we depersonalize them – and ourselves as well – in the basic sense that we disregard them as the singular persons that they are: persons who transcend their social roles, who call for our open address and love, and whom it is an abysmal thing to kill.

What's more, although the *Iliad* conceives men as mortal and death as absolute, the glory of their social persona is potentially immortal. Indeed, the mortality of the heroes even figures as a contributing motive for risking death, since this is a possible avenue to immortal glory (cf. Hammer 2002). Here is Sarpedon again:

> "Ah my friend, if you and I could escape this fray
> and live forever, never a trace of age, immortal,
> I would never fight on the front lines again
> or command you to the field where men win fame.
> But now, as it is, the fates of death await us,
> thousands poised to strike, and not a man alive
> can flee them or escape – so in we go for attack!
> Give our enemy glory or win it for ourselves!" (12.322–328)

In perceiving both himself and his enemies in terms of their potentially immortal social roles – and by eclipsing them as singular persons who can die – the warrior can reduce both his reluctance to kill and his fear of death.

Finally, a recurring motif in the *Iliad* is the picturing of warriors as ravaging wild animals (lions, boars, snakes) or natural forces (fire, storms, water). The following rendering of Achilles may serve as an example:

> But over against him came Achilles rearing like some lion
> out on a rampage […]
> crouched for attack, his jaws gaping, over his teeth
> the foam breaks out, deep in his chest the brave heart groans,
> he lashes his ribs, his flanks and hips with his tail,

he whips himself into fighting-fury, eyes glaring,
hurls himself head-on – kill one of the men or die,
go down himself at the first lethal charge! (20.164–173)

Weil claims that images such as the above are meant to depict the transformation of warriors into "blind forces of sheer impetus" (IPF: 61), hurling themselves into battle without hesitation or reflection, intent on killing the enemy. Although there is clearly some truth in Weil's interpretation, I think it is also misleading.

It seems that the poetic depictions likening warriors to wild beasts and forces of nature frequently refer to a psychological state that in the *Iliad* goes under the name of "fighting-fury". Whether achieved by the warriors or instilled in them by some god, fighting-fury is described as giving the warriors unflinching martial courage. However, this sort of state can hardly be understood, in light of Weil's concept of force, as a pure sense of power that makes one view one's enemies as indifferent things. Plausibly, fighting-fury signifies the kind of "defensive rage" (LeDoux 1996) that is common in war and atrocities and that has also been labeled, for example, "forward panic" (Collins 2008) and "berserker rage" (Protevi 2018). This is not the place for a thorough analysis of defensive rage. Still, it seems clear that it is a state of mind that is essentially characterized by repression or dissociation. Typically, the rage is preceded by intense feelings of fear and aversion to engaging in hostile action. It occurs when the person in question dissociates from his own vulnerability and conscience and becomes immersed in a state of blind, aggressive focus on the enemy to be destroyed (cf. Collins 2008).

7.3. Denial of responsibility

Lastly, the heroes of the *Iliad* have a basic tendency to renounce personal responsibility for their actions by invoking the gods as external forces that govern both natural and human events beyond the will and control of the heroes.

Let us have a look at the other main scene in which the inclination to kill clashes with the perspective of love. I am thinking about the meeting between Achilles and Priam towards the end of the epic.

The backdrop is that Achilles has killed Hector, the son of Priam, to exact revenge for the death of Patroclus. And not only that. Achilles has defiled Hector's corpse and refused to return it to the mourning family. Aided by the

gods, Priam manages to make his way to Achilles' quarters in the Achaean camp to plead for his son's body. The old man kneels down besides Achilles and kisses the hands of his son's murderer: "those terrible, man-killing hands" (24.478). What happens?

In her reading, Weil points to the love and pity that the two mortal enemies come to feel for each other as they share their grief and sorrow (IPF: 63–64). Yet, according to Weil, Achilles soon forgets "the very presence" of the suffering Priam. As Achilles is overtaken by his sense of power over Priam, he perceives the latter as just an "inanimate object" and pushes him aside as we do such objects (IPF: 47–48).

However, this interpretation distorts the way in which Achilles struggles with the tension between his love and his lingering anger. The fact is that the compassion that Priam awakens in Achilles lasts through the whole scene. When Achilles pushes Priam aside, this is not because he would dehumanize the latter and treat him as an inert thing. Rather, he pushes Priam aside "gently" in order to be able to connect with his own grief (24.509).[14] Still, Achilles' anger against Hector is not completely gone. An extremely emotional man, Achilles struggles throughout the encounter to keep his deadly rage in check and let his compassion for Priam prevail. In fact, when Achilles at times acts threateningly towards Priam, it is precisely to prevent him from saying things that might spark his anger. Hence, the scene does not describe Achilles as a helpless victim of the irresistible viewpoint of force as something that would deterministically wipe out his compassion for Priam. What gives the scene its dynamics is that Achilles is fundamentally open to the perspective of love, so that his anger and hunger for revenge are felt as temptations to abandon that perspective.

So it happens that the two men find themselves sitting together, crying and mourning over their dead loved ones. In the end, Achilles returns Hector's body to Priam and promises to halt the fighting until Hector has received a proper burial.

But there is a limit to love. It is important to note that while Achilles feels compassion for Priam, he does *not* express any remorse or guilt for what he has done. Why? The reason is intimated in Achilles' attempt to console Priam:

[14] Tellingly, Weil's vision of the irresistible nature of force leads her to distort the original and omit the word "gently" in her translation. Cf. Holoka (2003): 74–75.

"So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men
live on to bear such torments – the gods live free of sorrows.
There are two great jars that stand on the floor of Zeus's halls
and hold his gifts, our miseries one, the other blessings.
When Zeus who loves the lightning mixes gifts for a man,
now he meets with misfortune, now good times in turn.
When Zeus dispenses gifts from the jar of sorrows only,
he makes a man an outcast – brutal, ravenous hunger
drives him down the face of the shining earth,
stalking far and wide, cursed by gods and men.
So with my father, Peleus.
[…]
only a single son he fathered, doomed at birth,
cut off in the spring of life –
and I, I give the man no care as he grows old
since here I sit in Troy, far from my fatherland,
a grief to you, a grief to all your children ..." (24.517–542)

In this passage, Achilles for the first and only time thematizes himself as the slayer, not of Trojan heroes destined for eternal reputation or detested objects of revenge, but of Priam's beloved sons, whose death is an absolute loss and an inestimable cause of sorrow. Crucially, Achilles begins his description from a third-person perspective invoking the immortals and Zeus as the force of destiny that has placed Achilles, the son of Peleus – "doomed at birth" – in Troy to be a grief to Hector and Priam and so many more Trojans. When Achilles finally says and takes over the "I", he does it post factum, figuring himself as the end result and victim of a destiny beyond his control.

To stamp down their pity, Agamemnon and Menelaus insisted that the honor code that had them kill Adrestus was just and fitting. By contrast, Achilles does not say that his killing of Priam's sons was justified. Perhaps his compassion for Priam has removed the possibility of regarding his devastating actions as simply just? Instead, Achilles renounces personal responsibility by claiming that his life and his actions were never of his making but were the result of forces beyond his control. Faced with the possibility of taking moral responsibility for his love and compassion for Priam and allowing it to grow into moral understanding and a questioning of his own worldview and life decisions, Achilles refuses. It is this fundamental evasion of responsibility that

makes it possible for Achilles to feel compassion without remorse, to cry and feel pity over the results of his own actions as if they were a natural disaster.

8. The perspective of the Iliad

What makes the *Iliad* more or less unique among war epics and accounts for its moral-existential and literary character, is its duality: on the one hand, its affirmation and glorification of the war as a manifestation of the ancient ethic of honor; on the other hand, its compassionate eye for the horrible human consequences of war and its equal treatment of the warriors on both sides. However, this duality never becomes an acute tension or a reason for questioning the honor ethic, the logic of revenge, the slaughter.

Why?

First, the *Iliad* fundamentally endorses and appeals to the honor ethic that drives the war as a superior normative framework that is right and natural and that trumps the voice of love and conscience. To be sure, the epic shines a critical light on the individual heroes' misuse of the honor code, especially on their tendency to let their egoistic urge for personal glory trump their concern for the good of the community or the rightful respect due to their enemies. Just as Achilles' rage against Agamemnon is depicted as reckless and disastrous in its consequences for the Achaean army, his avenging of Patroclus by mutilating Hector's body is portrayed as exceedingly vicious and disrespectful. Nevertheless, the *Iliad* never questions the motives of honor as such or their manifestation in the slaughter. In so far as the killing in the name of honor is not hyperbolic, the *Iliad* insists that it is just and fitting. Indeed, by recounting the tales and singing the praise of the heroes, the *Iliad* partakes in transmitting this ethic and actualizing the eternal glory that the heroes were dreaming about.

Second, as a last line of defense, the *Iliad* resorts to a basic evasion of personal responsibility. In the meeting between Achilles and Priam that we just witnessed, Achilles, instead of appealing to the honor ethic as just and justifying, depicts himself as a victim of a divine destiny beyond his control or possible questioning. It seems clear that the *Iliad*'s perspective coincides with Achilles' at this point.

The basic acceptance of the ethic of honor as rightful or as a given destiny explains why the duality between celebrating and mourning the war never unsettles the *Iliad*. It also explains the *Iliad*'s basic moral and literary character as a tragedy, which inspires pity and tears at the suffering and loss befalling the

victims of the war without ever letting the pity develop into remorse and radical moral self-examination. Whatever the heroes are called to do by the honor ethic is accepted as lying beyond the possibility of moral questioning and responsibility; likewise, whatever the heroes experience in terms of love and compassion for others never becomes a reason for challenging this ethic.

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