MORAL DECISIONS IN HOMER

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Abstract. Deliberating characters in Homer evince varying degrees of commitment to heroic morality, ranging from a straightforward sense of shame to a more inward adherence to moral imperatives however critically or uncritically adopted. The moral dimension arises spontaneously for them rather than through a conscious decision to act morally. The conflict between morality and the desire to survive varies in form and resolution with the deliberators and is a major index of character.

Much useful work has been done on the ‘reality’ of Homeric deliberations and decisions, together with their psychological mechanisms and structural features.¹ From these careful analyses² we have become more aware of the subtlety and flexibility of the Homeric formula and its sensitivity to character and context, while our appreciation of the elements in the psychological conflicts of the deliberators (their anxiety and self-doubt, for example, in the face of the moral pressures of heroic society) has been greatly enhanced. The present essay will resume this discussion in order to examine more closely what might be called the terms of reference of those deliberations with a moral component. How are we to identify this component and how and in what framework do the deliberating characters recognise it and then balance it against other factors, including, most obviously, self-interest?

What is perhaps the locus classicus of Homeric decision-making, at least in the Iliad, appears at 11.401-10. In danger of being encircled by Trojans now that his comrades have fled in fear, Odysseus ponders the appropriate course:

¹ I would like to thank one of the anonymous editorial readers of Scholia whose helpful suggestions led to recasting of the introduction and conclusion.
namely whether to ‘stand’ or ‘retreat’. He considers it a ‘great evil’ (μέγα κακόν) to run away but ‘chillier’ (ρίγιν) to be caught. These deliberations are conducted with reference to the so-called heroic code, or Homeric morality, which requires courage in the face of death, and the ‘great evil’ consists in violating that requirement. We can call this a moral consideration in that the code lays down a series of unwritten rules concerning socially required or virtuous behaviour. We need not worry if Odysseus has thought out his morality for himself or adopted it uncritically through social conditioning; it remains in either case a moral consideration.³

Odysseus does not set out to find the morally correct course. Rather his (implicit) terms of reference are more open (τι πάθω; ‘What will become of me?’, 404)), so that the best course may turn out to be the morally correct one or it may involve the pursuit of self-interest. Nevertheless, though Odysseus’ impulse, and thus his first option, may appear to be to run away, it is, more precisely, the wrongness of running away (μέγα μὲν κακόν αὐτὸς ἐκ φέβωμαι / πληθὺν ταρβήσας, ‘It will be a great evil if I run away, fearing their multitude’, 404f.). This is not a man who has to measure a cowardly impulse against his moral code and then force himself to obey the latter. Rather the code springs first to his mind as the very context of the rejectable option. And yet he does not act automatically from moral conditioning, but makes a conscious choice.⁴ His thoughts of escape (which show that the context is wider than the moral) are barely entertained before being rejected as the formulaic line (407) intercepts them and returns him to the code which he now formulates with brief explicitness, clearly, as Fenik⁵ remarks, subordinating all prudential considerations to the observance of that code (410).

Odysseus’ morality here appears to be more profound than a concern to avoid being seen doing the wrong thing. At any rate, he does not, unlike Hector at 22.99-107, imagine the consequences of cowardice in terms of personal shame and decide that death would be (emotionally) preferable to the experience of dishonour. He merely consults, as it were, the book of rules. And yet it is always finally impossible to know in such cases (especially in Homeric

³ On the other hand, the famous deliberations of Achilles at Il. 1.188-221 and of Odysseus at Od. 20.1-30 do not revolve around moral considerations but involve conflicts between impulses crying for immediate gratification and tactically wiser courses of action.
⁵ This monologue is one of ‘blank sobriety, spare and unembellished’ which ‘confirms Odysseus’ stature. . . . We note that his chances of success carry no weight and are not even mentioned. They are irrelevant. No distinctions or mitigating allowances are permitted to blur the absoluteness of his choice’ (Fenik [2] 72).
‘shame-oriented’ society, but even in our own) whether the agent is motivated by abstract principle or a kind of ‘higher’ self-interest. We may have long ago decided that a certain kind of immoral action has such intolerably unpleasant social consequences for ourselves that we no longer have to imagine them in order to be deterred from the action in question, and this may be Odysseus’ position here.\(^6\)

Menelaus’ decision to play it safe (17.90-112) provides a useful contrast to Odysseus’ decision to ‘be brave’. The consequences of running away are here more specific than the situation faced by Odysseus in book 11. Menelaus would not simply be running away—which is in general contrary to the warrior code—but he would be abandoning the dead Patroclus and the armour. Moreover, he is quite clear and explicit about his relation to Patroclus who came to Troy on his behalf and has now in a sense died for him. Given his full awareness of the moral implications of desertion in general (the situation faced by Odysseus) and of this desertion in particular with its more personal dimension, his contemplation of such an act seems all the more outrageous. His formulation of the retreat option is contemptibly feeble and might be paraphrased: ‘If I behave badly, I hope no one will see it, and if they do I hope they will not condemn me for it.’ Menelaus is motivated not by principle, but solely by embarrassment and shame. The syntax of passivity and futile hope is carried on into the second option: ‘If I fight Hector and the Trojans alone, I hope I won’t be surrounded.’ Odysseus saw the ‘chilly’ possibility of being ‘caught alone’ (11.405f.), but the form of his expression, especially when contrasted with that of Menelaus (who fearfully expresses a negative wish) suggests greater emotional detachment from that possibility. The formulaic line (17.97=11.407) in Menelaus’ case contains a diametrically opposite implication, contributing to the rhetoric of his self-deluding rationalisation (‘Why waste time talking nonsense? Obviously I have to run away!’). He finds it as ridiculous to consider staying as Odysseus the opposite course. When originally posing the options, Menelaus had seen staying as tantamount to trying to fight Hector and a mass of Trojans who would doubtless surround him. Now as he opts for flight he adds another reason which has the odour of a rationalisation: Hector is fighting with divine support and is therefore insuperable. He then returns awkwardly to his earlier imagined situation of

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\(^6\) Plato’s Republic (441d-444c) may suggest a third possibility: the truly righteous man does not act out of a concern for the personal consequences of being righteous or unrighteous, nor again by recognising an abstract principle and consciously choosing to conform to it, but because his psyche is so organised that righteous acts spring spontaneously from it.

\(^7\) Note the similarity of 93 and 100, which shows Menelaus’ preoccupation with honour (cf. Petersmann [4] 152).
Danaan contempt for his flight, adding the argument that such contempt would be unjustified because (he implies) no one would fight against a man supported by a god. Pleading divine will is, of course, a convenient (though spurious) tactic for avoiding responsibility. Staying to fight Hector thus can be made to appear not only suicidal but downright quixotic. So Menelaus resolves the conflict between self-interest and right by convincing himself that there is after all no conflict at all.  

At 21.550-80 Agenor ponders two options which he hopes will allow him to avoid facing Achilles. He rejects the first as bound to lead to a cowardly death and then the second as likely to have a similar outcome. He therefore chooses a third option: to face Achilles in the hope that he may defeat him. Both of Agenor’s options appear tactical, rather than moral, with the aim of staying alive: (1) to run away with the others and still be caught by Achilles, or (2) to run away in another direction and escape completely. But the second option might not work; Achilles might catch and kill him. But what about facing Achilles with some chance of success (a third option)? As Petersmann observes, Agenor never actually comes to a decision in the course of the monologue itself. Odysseus and Menelaus, faced with two priorities, bravery and survival, felt that the claims of honour or morality had been met. Now, superficially at least, Agenor’s debate can be read as informed by the single priority of survival. Thus the first two options are both unacceptable because they will in all probability result in Agenor’s death. The third option, though far from guaranteeing survival, at least seems to hold out a greater chance of it. On the other hand, it is impossible to miss an underlying concern with heroic honour: not only, in terms of the scenario of the first option, will Achilles cut his throat, but Agenor will thereby die ‘like a coward’. The first option combines death with dishonour, while the third offers an honourable outcome, if not survival. Death with honour then is preferable to death with dishonour.

In a similar debate at 22.98-130 Hector ponders two options, which he hopes will allow him to avoid facing Achilles. He rejects the first at once as dishonourable and the second as impractical. He must face Achilles after all. Here again we find a more complex pattern than the straight choice between

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10 ‘No question of honor: the chances for bare survival determine his choice’ (Fenik [2] 78).
two tactical options aimed amorally at pure survival. Hector might: (1) withdraw into the city and survive dishonourably—but as he formulates this option he finds that honour asserts itself: it would be better to face Achilles and kill or be killed; (2) try to negotiate with Achilles—but this, while not apparently dishonourable, is certainly impractical. I have here formulated the options in accordance with the syntax. The two (grammatically) major options (both predicated on the priority of survival) are introduced by ‘if, on the one hand’ (99) and ‘if, on the other hand’ (111). The third, honourable option of facing Achilles obtrudes itself as it did for Agenor, for few heroes can long exclude the claims of honour from their thinking. The element of self-delusion in the second option, however, makes for a more sophisticated narrative than we find in the monologues of books 11 and even 17. Particulariy piquant is the way in which the very length and detail of Hector’s second option, his imagined reconciliation with Achilles, produces an ever-increasing sense of its utter implausibility until the speaker pulls himself up with the formulaic ‘Why did my θυμός (‘spirit’) say these things?’ (which has a different context and implication in each of the four passages) and then seems to smile at his own naivety through the parallel of the courting couple.

Odysseus is admirable for unequivocally choosing bravery and honour over survival in book 11. But he is faced clearly and starkly with two options and only two—the first involving escape with dishonour, and the second probable death with honour. Given that there are no other options, Odysseus as an honourable warrior must and does reject (1), and does so, as we saw, quickly and without fuss or self-delusion. Hector, on the other hand, does not at first know how many options are available to him. Rather he must gradually appraise the situation. His first option, like that of Odysseus, offers escape with dishonour, and so he rejects it—though not so unequivocally as Odysseus did.

11 Scully [2] 18 explains how ‘the range of Hector’s reflection encompasses a broader view of life and the war than found in the other soliloquies.’

12 ‘Here the suspension of the conditional clause is maintained over eleven whole verses, producing an effect of climax as Hektor’s offer grows progressively more extraordinary in value, until it reaches the point where he himself realizes that this is all just day-dreaming. At this point (122) he breaks off, without reaching an apodosis’ (N. Richardson, The Iliad. A Commentary 6: Books 21-24 [Cambridge 1993] 119 ad 22.111. W. Schadewaldt, Von Homers Welt und Werk (Stuttgart 1959) 302 describes Hector’s self-delusion about bargaining with Achilles as ‘eine Art Flucht in der Seele noch vor der Flucht in die Mauern Trojas’. K. Crotty, The Poetics of Supplication: Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey (Ithaca 1994) 85 observes that Hector’s imagined supplication of Achilles is ‘notable for its lack of a clear purpose. . . . he never articulates precisely what he hopes to accomplish by all his renunciation’. For the epanastrophe of 22.126-28 see R. P. Martin, The Language of Heroes (Ithaca 1989) 138 and Crotty [above, this note] 86.
(cf. 11.407-10 with 22.108-10). Now it is not immediately clear at this point that there remains only a single option involving probable death with honour, as was the case for Odysseus; so Hector, whose first priority is to survive, if only he can do so honourably, casts about for a second option. He finds it, but, as he is forced to acknowledge, it will not work. So he is left with the only genuine alternative to his first option—to confront Achilles. Hector’s priorities then are closer to those of Odysseus than might at first appear. Nevertheless, Odysseus makes reference to a general principle (11.408-10), while Hector is moved by imagining a particular unpleasant situation (22.99-107). Fenik expresses well the difference between the two men: ‘Odysseus thinks within the categories of the heroic code. . . . Hector lives by the same precepts, but for him the imperative presents itself as specific ingredients, past and present, of his own life and dilemma. Poulydamos’ rejected advice of the night before comes back to haunt him. . . . avoidance of disrepute has become shame already incurred that he cannot endure to face.’

Agenor, on the other hand, does seem prepared to accept survival without honour. What he cannot accept is the worst of both worlds: death and dishonour (21.555).

The purely moral decision, however, is reserved for a woman, Penelope in *Odyssey* 19, who explains that she is torn, undecided, between two options: whether (1) to stay by her son and look after the property, remaining faithful to Odysseus or (2) to marry the best of the suitors (19.525-34). However, while she once leaned towards the first option, she is now leaning towards the second (there is a shorter statement of her aporia at 16.73-7). This passage is notable for being an ongoing deliberation without closure, so that the emphasis is on the state of mind of the deliberator rather than on a decision reached. Accordingly it lacks the urgent immediacy of some deliberations, especially the Iliadic stand-or-retreat, life-and-death deliberations in the heat of battle. Penelope’s state of mind during her deliberations, as she describes it here, is not calmly rational; rather she is subject to uncontrolled and anxious thoughts (an idea reinforced by the accompanying simile). Her recounting of the options then is clearly not a record of particular repeated events, but a rational distillation of those options as she now sees them. What actually repeatedly goes on in her mind is more complicated, less rational and less ordered. One is reminded of the contrast between Agamemnon’s rational and ordered deliberations over Iphigienia’s sacrifice in the parodos of Aeschylus’ play and his counterpart’s aporia in the anapaestic prologue of the *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

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14 According to Zanker, *The Heart of Achilles* (Ann Arbor 1994) 61, guilt is ‘the ultimate driving force’ in Hector’s decision.
where there is a strong sense of an acutely anxious decision-making process protracted and endlessly repeated without closure (Aesch. Ag. 205-17, Eur. IA 34-42). The absence of closure in the present passage is aggravated by Penelope’s feeling that the situation itself about which she is deliberating is changing, now that Telemachos is pressuring her (she feels) effectively to abandon her much-cherished fidelity to her absent husband. However, the central issue for the present discussion is the nature of the options. She is trying, in a sense, to do justice to the requirements of her husband and family, and because she is a woman in a man’s world, she is perhaps less distracted by self-interest, being used to subordinating her needs to those of her male relatives. As Foley puts it,\textsuperscript{16} Penelope, when she finally decides, ‘makes a fully conscious and autonomous decision that entails rejecting hope and desire for obedience to social responsibilities’.

The moral component of all these deliberations can be identified in the claims of heroic society clearly recognised and accorded relevance by the deliberating characters, though they evince different levels of moral commitment ranging from a simple shame to what appears to be an inner adherence to moral imperatives however critically or uncritically adopted. The moral dimension arises spontaneously for them (since they are people whose whole thinking is thoroughly imbued in the values of their society) rather than through a conscious decision to try to act morally or even just to take the moral dimension into consideration. Indeed, when the characters appear to be attempting to exclude the moral perspective, it nevertheless subtly overtakes them, as was especially striking in the case of Agenor. The resolution of the conflict between morality and self-interest varies with the deliberators and is a major index of character. Odysseus’ commitment to the code is unequivocal once he clearly apprehends its demands in his situation; Menelaus’ desire to survive, on the other hand, is so strong that we feel it powerfully shaping his whole argument in spite of his clear recognition of the claims of morality. Agenor and Hector move beyond their initial options, impelled by both morality and the desire to survive. The impression is conveyed that if survival had offered itself unequivocally as an option Agenor at least would have been unable to resist it, whereas in a climate of uncertainty morality is better able to assert itself. Hector, on the other hand, rejects at once a possible but overwhelmingly dishonourable course, and when he does, briefly, delude himself, it is not, in the manner of Menelaus, over the morality of a course of action, but concerns the psychology of his unforgiving adversary.