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Research Note: A New Perspective on Revenge and Justice in Homer

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Most of us are aware that our idea of justice comes largely from Ancient Greece. But we might be surprised at how old Greek justice really is. Classical Athens (490-323 B.C.), to which we owe much of our understanding of justice, was itself heir to a system of revenge justice that was older still -- perhaps as old as the Mycenaean period (1200-1100 B.C.). The record of this period is sparse, and with the exception of a few graves and ruined palaces, all that we know of Mycenaean life is found in the oral poetry of Homer.

Because the Mycenaeans were illiterate, the tales of the warrior kings preserved in Homer served as storage mechanisms for social values. Much of the behavior which these tales idealized was aggressive and retaliatory. Both the Iliad and the Odyssey depict heroes who seek enormous and violent revenge on their enemies. Achilles, for example, kills Hector to avenge the death of Patroklos and then mutilates his body by dragging it unmercifully around the walls of Troy. Odysseus returns to Ithaca after a twenty year absence and not only kills all one hundred and eight of Penelope's noble suitors but then slaughters and mutilates his own disloyal servants.

To modern readers the severity of revenge, the sensitivity to insult, and the overwhelming concern for honor with which these heroes are preoccupied seems extreme, but a study of heroic behavior shows that, while not yet the equivalent of a justice in the modern sense, revenge was part of a developing concept of retributive justice based on fairness and reciprocity. To heroes such as Achilles, Agamemnon, and Odysseus, revenge was not only an expression of personal anger but a matter of necessary reciprocity and punishment taken in behalf of the group and accomplished according to certain rules. This is not to say that in such a primitive period social proprieties were always observed, or even consistent, or that the Homeric hero's understanding of his motivations was clear, but a careful examination of the explanations which the heroes give for their actions does indicate that revenge was a serious moral matter.

Revenge was a means of reciprocal justice dependent on fair measure and at its best it punished the aggressor, restored honor, and maintained social balance. Its importance as a moral issue in Homeric society is indicated by attempts to control its extremes in order to guarantee fairness. The accounts in Homer show that revenge was accompanied by proprieties meant to guarantee that it be neither too lenient nor too severe. Sometimes the Homeric hero was tempted by more immediate gratifications such as a large ransom to forget the degree of punishment that responsible revenge demanded. Twice in the Iliad Agamemnon is forced to argue for proper severity. In the first case Menelaos, the aggrieved party in whose cause the Trojan War is being fought, is about to accept a ransom and thus spare a captive Trojan. Agamemnon reminds his brother that the only proper revenge is death for all Trojans. Menelaos agrees, kills his captive, and gives up the profit that the ransom was tempted by more immediate gratifications such as a large ransom to forget the degree of punishment that responsible revenge demanded. Twice in the Iliad Agamemnon is forced to argue for proper severity. In the first case Menelaos, the aggrieved party in whose cause the Trojan War is being fought, is about to accept a ransom and thus spare a captive Trojan. Agamemnon reminds his brother that the only proper revenge is death for all Trojans. Menelaos agrees, kills his captive, and gives up the profit that the ransom would have brought. In the second case Agamemnon himself kills two Trojan boys and foregoes the ransom of gold and wrought iron which they have offered. Although the separation between just reprisal and material profit is not always clear, both these instances in the Iliad seem meant to demonstrate that proper revenge was not a matter of personal gain and that it required some sacrifice from the avenger as well as from his victim.

As there were limits on clemency, there were also safeguards against undue cruelty. Passages in both the Iliad and the Odyssey indicate a concern that punishment not
The climax of the Iliad is the death of the Trojan leader Hektor when he is chased by Achilles around the walls of the city and finally faces him in single combat.

Achilles in one of his quieter moments regrets the rage against Agamemnon that has led him to abandon his fellow Greeks, describing it as a mistake caused by an emotional reaction which he failed to control. He denounces the anger that overcomes reason, describing it as gall that makes a man grow angry for all his great mind and that swarms inside his heart, becoming a thing sweeter to him than the dripping of honey. Later, when Achilles’ punishment of Hektor’s body becomes excessive as he drags it by the heels around Troy, the gods themselves intervene to prevent its corruption and to persuade him to return it to Priam. In the Odyssey, Odysseus stops his old nurse Eurycleia as she raises a cry of triumph over the bodies of the slain suitors because, he says, it is not proper to glory over dead men. Since it was customary in battle situations for a warrior to vaunt over the body of his foe, the implication in this passage seems to be that the context of revenge is somehow different, that the suitors have paid for their intrusion into the household, and that to insult them further would be unfair.

The necessity of revenge also seems to have been rooted in powers or cosmic principles beyond human preference. For example in the Odyssey the killing of the suitors, undertaken with the sanction of Zeus and the assistance of Athena, has a character more of execution than of voluntary slaughter. Odysseus does not consider himself the cause of the suitors’ deaths. Rather, he says, it was their own hard actions and the doom of the gods.

The precise relationship between this necessary reciprocity and justice is difficult to determine. It is also a problem for translation. In the pre-conceptual world of the heroes, Homer had no word for “justice” as we understand it, but he did have words for “right behavior” and “proper order,” and efforts to enforce these probably carried an intent very similar to our intent when we preserve justice. What is difficult to keep clear is that the content of these “justice” words was different. We do not believe that killing an enemy prisoner is just. The Homeric heroes did.

When Agamemnon reminds Menelaos that he must give up the ransom, Homer’s comment is that Agamemnon is able to bend the heart of his brother because he urges aisima (what is just or right). Although to us the subsequent killing of the Trojan captive seems wrong, it does not to Homer, and a translation of justice for aisima is probably as close as we can come to expressing Homeric meaning.

An illustration of the primitive level at which justice was conceptualized and the restrictions that Homeric language placed on its expression can be found in the famous scene in Iliad 22 where Achilles finally kills Hektor. After an exhausting struggle, Hektor lies in the dust dying. Achilles stands over him taunting him and telling him that he will not be buried as a hero, but that his body will be left to rot and be prey to the dogs and vultures. Hektor, still able to speak, offers a huge ransom, hoping to persuade Achilles to grant him proper burial. Achilles refuses. The reasons he gives for his refusal show the undifferentiated nature of Homeric moral thought.

Achilles does not say and probably cannot say that he kills Hektor because justice demands that he do so, or that he is leaving Hektor’s body to the dogs because anger has pushed him beyond fair and reasonable limits. He shows no understanding of the difference between moral responsibility and emotional indulgence. Nor does he show any concern for which of his several motivations is primary. Yet for the stage of development reached in the Homeric period, his motivation is rather high. He tells Hektor that he (Hektor) was a fool to think that when he killed Patroklos there would be no avenger left to hunt him down. The word he uses for avenger is oosster, which also meant helper or aider. His use of oosster shows that his revenge was an act of cooperation meant to repair the damage Hektor has done to his Greek comrades and his friend Patroklos. By killing Hektor as Hektor killed them he will restore the balance of honor. But he is also angry for himself. By killing Achilles’ comrades and by capturing his armor Hektor damaged Achilles’ honor as well. He tells Hektor, “I would like to hack your meat away and eat it raw for the things you have done to me.

Why then does Achilles seek revenge on Hektor? Is he acting for his own honor and out of anger and injured pride? Certainly that would be a low motive. Or is he acting out of higher concern for reciprocity and the desire to defend the honor of his companion who would have done the same for him? Or, even higher, is he acting as a good friend and a good Greek defending the honor of his people against their enemies the Trojans? Even though modern readers may question his sincerity, the answer is that all three motivations were real for Achilles. This mixing of levels is made possible because the still general nature of Homeric moral terms allowed more fluidity between moral levels than we might think reasonable. Unlike us, Achilles can slip from one level of thought to another without being bothered by inconsistency. The fact that neither Achilles nor the Greek audiences who listened to the recitations of his motives found them uncomfortable points to a major difference between Homeric thought and our own.

But, different though it may have been, it was still deeply concerned with the question of justice and punishment. The answer, characteristic of the period, lay in reciprocity, and reciprocity meant revenge. If the cardinal moral rule in Homer was to help one’s friends and hurt one’s enemies, then revenge was a method of rewarding friendship through retaliation against the enemy.

The final illustration of the importance of revenge is that it is the major theme of both the Iliad and the Odyssey, and it was these two poems which were the source of role models and ethical values. While not yet fully developed, the ideas of fairness and reciprocity found in Homer were the first steps in the evolution of the justice concept. They deserve more attention than they have so far received in discussions of Greek ethics. Homeric values were a legacy for the age of Plato and Aristotle. Reformed in the great minds of the Classical Period, they are also an important part of our own ethical inheritance.