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# DO HOMERIC HEROES MAKE REAL DECISIONS?*

## I

Bruno Snell has made familiar a certain thesis about the Homeric poems, to the effect that these poems depict a primitive form of mindedness.[1] The area of mindedness concerned is agency, and the content of the thesis is that Homeric agents are not agents in the fullest sense: they do not make choices in clear self-awareness of what they are doing; choices are made *for* them rather than *by* them; in some cases the instigators of action are gods, in other cases they are forces acting internally on the agent and over which he has no control. Homeric heroes act in the way Descartes thought an animal acts: agitur, non agit.[2] Such agents 'handeln nicht eigentlich (d.h. mit vollem Bewußtsein eigenen Handelns), sondern sie reagieren'.[3] The model of the agent which we nowadays have is roughly of a self which determines, rather than is determined to, action; the self arrives at this determination by considering available reasons for action in the light of its overall purposes,[4] and it moves to action in full self-consciousness of what it is doing, and why. This model of action, Snell claims, is not met in Greek literature before the tragedians. I think anyone ought to concede that there is *some* difference between the way Homer portrays decision-making and the way it is portrayed in tragedy (with further differences among the tragedians themselves); but has Snell located the difference in the right place? I shall argue in this paper that he has not.

One of the main difficulties in pursuing this question has been the vagueness and uncertainty of the terminology. Snell himself has been a prime offender in this regard: talk about consciousness, self-consciousness, autonomy and so on is of absolutely no help unless it is rendered precise by encashment of the obscure and metaphorical components. It is not enough to claim that Homeric heroes do not make proper decisions, or do not act with full self-consciousness. What do these words mean? What exactly is it that they cannot do? I shall examine three more precise formulations of the general claim to be found in Snell's (and Voigt's) writings.

* I am grateful to Professors Walter Nicolai and Arbogast Schmitt for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The paper was written during a spell as an Alexander von Humboldt Fellow at the University of Mainz. I am most grateful to the Stiftung for making this stay possible, and for their generous assistance during the tenure of the Fellowship.

[1] Especially in the following: *Aischylos und das Handeln in Drama* (*Philologus*, Supp. 20, 1928), to be read with the review by E. Wolff in *Gnomon* 5 (1929), 386–400; 'Das Bewußtsein von eigenen Entscheidung im früheren Griechentum' (repr. in his *Gesammelte Schriften* [Göttingen, 1966], 18–31); 'Göttliche und menschliche Motivation im homerischen Epos' (repr. in *Ges. Schriften*, 55–61); *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (Hamburg, 1948); *Szenen aus griechischen Dramen* (Berlin, 1971). See also H. Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (Munich, 1962), pp. 83–103.

[2] Snell, *Ges. Schr.*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 61.

[3] C. Voigt, *Ueberlegung und Entscheidung: Studien zur Selbstauffassung des Menschen bei Homer* (Beiträge zur Klass. Phil., 48; Meisenhaim am Glan, 1972), p. 106.

[4] Reasons and purposes engage with one another: there is no *general* antecedence of one to the other. An Aristotelian – as opposed to a Humean – model of action allows for situations in which overall purposes are *shaped* by occurrent perceptions of features of the world as constituting reasons for action. See here D. Wiggins, 'Deliberation and Practical Reason' reprinted in A. Rorty (ed.), *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 221–40.

## II

In the first place, Snell argues that Homer has no word for the self, and since he has no word for it, it follows that as far as he is concerned the thing does not exist: only a 'naive realism' would read into Homer something for which he himself has no name.[5] In default of a unitary self, Homeric man consists of a collection of various organs, each with its assigned function, but with no organising principle rendering them coherent. Put like that, the claim seems just fantastic. For it is not as if Homer represents his figures as *incoherent* assemblages of different organs: Achilles does not trip up every so often because his eye and his foot are unsynchronised. But it is nevertheless quite true that Homer has no word for the self.[6] What has gone wrong?

One mistake Snell has made is to read too much into the modern concept of selfhood, and consequently to approach Homer with inappropriate expectations. Talk of the self is no more than talk about the coherence of the mental activities of a single person. The self is delimited as just that thing whose defining characteristic it is to organise and unite those activities. In any normal person those activities will be organised and united, and the word 'self' is just a label we attach to the person in his capacity as mentally endowed unitary being. There is accordingly no more to a self than that which is referred to using a personal pronoun or proper name, both of which linguistic devices are of course to be found in Homer.[7] The concept of a self is just the concept of whatever is referred to using one of these devices. Hence without possessing a word for the schematic concept of the self, Homer nevertheless thinks of his characters – and must so think of them, since he represents them in a coherent, lifelike way – as unitary agents.[8]

[5] *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, ch. 1. Snell relies on the earlier work by J. Böhme, *Die Seele und das Ich im homerischen Epos* (Göttingen, 1929).

[6] That is, he has no *one* word for the *Gesamtgemüt*, as Böhme, op. cit. (n. 5), showed. In particular, the word ψυχή does not discharge this function, since it denotes no more than the life or consciousness of a man, in the sense of that which is taken away when he swoons or dies. Otto Regenbogen showed (in his 'Δαιμόνιον ψυχῆς φῶς', repr. in his *Kleine Schriften* [Munich, 1961], 1ff.) that the ψυχή is not to be thought of as materialising at the moment of death, but rather as accompanying a man throughout his life and deserting him at the moment of death. I think Regenbogen succeeds in showing that the ψυχή is the 'im Lebenden conditio sine qua non aller körperlichen, geistigen und emotionalen Regungen' (p. 20). But there is a difference between the life-principle of a man, which ψυχή may well be taken to represent, and the unitary nature of his self, which ψυχή cannot, as such, be taken to represent.

[7] cf. R. Sharples, '"But why has my spirit spoken with me thus?": Homeric Decision-making', *Greece and Rome* 30 (1983), 1–7 who correctly points out that the occurrence of the first-person pronoun is itself enough to equip Homer with a concept of selfhood, and that Snell's picture of Homeric man as an assemblage of various lobbying groups better fits Plato's model of the soul in *Republic* 4, or the myth of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*. Sharples also alludes to a similarity between Homer and Aristotle – and the divergence of both of them from Plato – on the subject of akrasia, which I discuss below.

[8] See the interesting piece by Christopher Gill ('Did Chrysippus Understand Medea?', *Phronesis* 28 [1983], 136–49), in which he argues that the Medea of Euripides' *Medea* 1078–80 must be thought of as a unitary agent. That was the line taken by Chrysippus, who argued that Medea's impulse to kill her children was contrary to reason in the sense that it was unreasonable, not in the sense that it was arational, as a Platonic model of the soul would have it. For Chrysippus, ὁρμαί, πάθη etc. are rational in the sense that they are *conceptual* mental states: they involve judgements. He apparently used Homeric examples to justify his view that the soul functions in a unified way (Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*, ed. P. De Lacy [Berlin, 1978–84], III.2.10–20). Galen takes a Platonic line on Medea's struggle (III.3.13–22), describing Medea's deliberation as an inner dialogue between *logismos* and *thumos*. But he introduces – as anyone who wishes to make sense of Medea must do – a self (αὐτή) separate from these parts of the soul, and alternately under their hegemony.

A second, but related, mistake in Snell's theory is indicated by Böhme's classic study, on which Snell relied so heavily in his claim that Homer had no word for the self. For it was part of Böhme's thesis that, although Homer has no *one* word for the self, he has an array of words (in particular *νόος* and *θυμός*) which can do duty for 'ich'. Böhme explicitly drew the right conclusion from this observation (pp. 91–2): the fact that different words are interchangeable for 'ich' shows that the organic coherence of the functions which the relevant words can otherwise denote was presupposed. In the case of *νόος* and *θυμός*, the coherence of the intellectual and the appetitive elements in the human mind is simply presupposed to the possibility that either word may go proxy for a word denoting the self, i.e. that which *unites* the various functions of mind.

A striking illustration of this comes in the often-cited passage in *Iliad* 11 where Odysseus comes under increasing pressure from the Trojans after Diomedes' withdrawal, and wonders whether to retreat:

> *ὀχθήσας δ' ἄρα εἶπε πρὸς ὃν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν·*
> *'ὤ μοι ἐγώ, τί πάθω; μέγα μὲν κακὸν αἴ κε φέβωμαι*
> *πληθὺν ταρβήσας· τὸ δὲ ῥίγιον αἴ κεν ἁλωώ*
> *μοῦνος· τοὺς δ' ἄλλους Δαναοὺς ἐφόβησε Κρονίων.*
> *ἀλλὰ τίη μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξατο θυμός;*
> *οἶδα γὰρ ὅττι κακοὶ μὲν ἀποίχονται πολέμοιο,*
> *ὃς δέ κ' ἀριστεύῃσι μάχῃ ἔνι, τὸν δὲ μάλα χρεὼ*
> *ἑστάμεναι κρατερῶς, ἤ τ' ἔβλητ' ἤ τ' ἔβαλ' ἄλλον.'*
>
> (403–10. Cf. 22.98–131)

Homer first says (403) that Odysseus spoke to his *θυμός*, and Odysseus' first words make it clear, if it needed making clear, that it is his *self* which is speaking. Odysseus suggests to his *θυμός* that while flight would be cowardly, to be taken by the enemy would be worse; then he asks 'But why has my *θυμός* spoken to me thus?' It would obviously be absurd to object here that Homer is confused; that he has inconsistently ascribed Odysseus' words first to his self (addressing his *θυμός*), and then to his *θυμός* (addressing his self). What we have is simply a dialogue of the self with itself. The fact that Odysseus' mind is *not* an incoherent assemblage of unrelated functions is vividly conveyed by the emergence of one of those functions, *θυμός*, first as hearer and then as speaker in this self-dialogue. The 'inconsistency' precisely subserves the purpose of representing Odysseus as an integrated whole.[9]

Methodologically speaking, the above discussion demonstrates the inadequacy of the so-called lexical method, upon which Snell relies, the principle that if a culture doesn't have a word for a thing, then it does not recognise that thing's existence.[10] Dodds subscribes to this principle when he writes that 'to ask whether Homer's people are determinists or libertarians is a fantastic anachronism: the question has never occurred to them, and if it were put to them it would be very difficult to make them understand what it meant.'[11] But he himself, at the end of the same paragraph,

[9] Böhme's comment: '... nicht mehrere Seelenteile treten nebeneinander, sondern was vorher als Anrede des Ich an den *θυμός* beschrieben wurde, wird nun, wo Odysseus die Verantwortung für die ausgesprochenen Befürchtungen von sich abwälzen will, für ein Selbstgespräch seines *θυμός* ausgegeben.' (op. cit. [n. 5], p. 80). And note that the soliloquy is closed with the words: *ἧος ὁ ταῦθ' ὥρμαινε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμὸν* (411). Here the soliloquy is represented as having been conducted by Odysseus *in* his thumos and phren.

[10] Further criticisms of the lexical method – different from mine – are to be found in H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, revised edition (Berkeley, 1983), *passim*.

[11] *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, 1951), p. 7.

describes Patroclus' death as 'overdetermined'. Of course Homer did not possess a *word* for the phenomenon of overdetermination. But that he did possess the *concept* of overdetermination is precisely shown by his making Patroclus aware that his death is (on Dodds's interpretation) due to more than one cause, each of which would have been sufficient on its own to bring about his death. In fact I believe Lesky has shown that Dodds is wrong to describe Patroclus' death as overdetermined: that is not quite the right concept.[12] I am not concerned here, however, with the question whether Dodds has correctly characterised Patroclus' death, but with the general principle that, contrary to what the lexical method supposes, it is quite possible (and indeed entirely normal) for an individual or culture to dispose of a concept for which it possesses no name.

It would be a corollary of the assumption behind the lexical method that a society could never *discover* that it had all along been working, implicitly, with some concept and proceed to baptise it; rather, whenever a society coined a new term, the concept which that term denoted would simultaneously spring into existence as an *invention* of the linguistic advance. But that seems implausible. To take an example from another area of mindedness, I might describe someone as 'switched off'. The term I here use is an artefact of the machine age, but does that mean that no one was ever switched off *before* the machine age? Surely not: the term 'switched off' denotes – in a new way – a mental state which was around, and known to be around, long before the invention of the relevant kind of machine – namely the state of being inattentive. It *presents* the state of being inattentive in a special way by noticing an analogy between the human mind and inanimate machines. To capture the distinction between what is and what is not invented when such a term is brought into the language, we need to employ a Fregean framework which distinguishes between name (*Eigenname*), referent (*Bedeutung*) – which may be either an object (*Gegenstand*) or a concept (*Begriff*) – and the mode of presentation (*Art des Gegebenseins*) of the object or concept. The point can then be more clearly expressed as follows: it is possible for an individual or community to invent an *Eigenname* for a *Gegenstand* or *Begriff* which was there all along. It is clear that the *Art des Gegebenseins* must be ranged with what gets invented in this transaction rather than what is already in place in the world: 'switched off' presents the state of being inattentive in a new mode.[13]

To forestall a potential line of objection, it should be noted that not everything which falls on the conceptual side of the thing/concept divide can be absorbed into the *Art des Gegebenseins*. That would lead to an extreme and incoherent nominalism committed to a world of *Dinge an sich*. The state of being inattentive, or switched off, must have a conceptual component which is utterly in the world; and similarly for the concept of the self. That component can present itself under different modes (and

[12] A. Lesky, *Göttliche und menschliche Motivation im homerischen Epos* (Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akadamie der Wissenschaften, 1961). The point is that the contributions of Apollo and Hector to Patroclus' death are not thought of as *independent* inputs, either of which would have been sufficient on its own to kill Patroclus. The gods work *with* (sometimes *through*) men. The term 'overdetermination' misses the essential unity of such action, which can be looked at now as the action of a god, and now as the action of a man. Rather than possessing two independent components, such action possesses two interdependent aspects. Compare Achilles' anger as seen through the eyes of Ajax (*Il.* 9.624–42): first as Achilles' own doing (628–9), then as inspired by the gods (636–7). Lesky gives further examples of this 'double aspect'.

[13] For an elucidation of the Fregean framework employed here, see especially G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford, 1982), ch. 1, along with J. McDowell, 'On the Sense and Reference of a Proper Name', *Mind* 86 (1977), 159–85; D. Wiggins, 'The Sense and Reference of Predicates', in C. Wright (ed.), *Frege: Tradition and Influence* (Oxford, 1984), 126–43.

must, whenever it presents itself, do so under *some* mode), just as a thing can be referred to in different ways (and must, whenever it is referred to, be referred to in *some* way). It would be incoherent here either to suppose that the mind could peep behind the *Art des Gegebenseins* (conceived as *obstructing* view of the object) and observe the things and concepts in themselves, or to suppose at the other extreme that the *Gegenstand/Begriff* and *Art des Gegebenseins* are so intimately connected with each other that the former must be individuated in terms of the latter. The difficult, but correct, position is that the relation is sufficiently intimate that the *Art des Gegebenseins* does indeed *present* (not obstruct) the *Gegenstand* or *Begriff* (which cannot be presented in *no* way), but not so intimate that different presentations of the same *Gegenstand* or *Begriff* are ruled out.

In certain of their uses, words like νόος and θυμός present the schematic concept of the self. They do so under their own, detectably different, modes. That Homer now has no word which corresponds to our word 'self' does not deprive him of the *concept* of selfhood, since what is presented by these words in the contexts which concern us (such as: he spoke to his θυμός) is precisely the integrated, unitary item which the word 'self' also (and always as opposed to sometimes) refers to. The semantic *difference* between 'self' and θυμός (in its relevant usage) must accordingly be located in the different *modes* under which these terms present the same *concept* (namely selfhood); in other words, the difference is a linguistic and not an ontological difference. Homer's world contains selves.

It would be a different kind of mistake to suppose that, because classical Greek thought did not possess the concept of will in its post-Kantian sense, it therefore did not have the concepts of intention or decision. These latter concepts can be captured within a vocabulary which is cognitivist and not volitional in character, simply because the cognitive need not be – and was not – conceived of as motivationally inert.[14] Aristotle's model of practical wisdom is set up in terms of the concepts αἴσθησις, νοῦς and ὄρεξις (*NE* 1139a17–18), but the noetic and orectic elements are not logically independent of one another: there is no *gap* to be felt between an agent's proper perception of the morally relevant facts of a situation, in the context of an overall desire for eudaimonia or eupraxia – itself constituted by a distinctive way of seeing his life – and his decision to act appropriately. The impulse, intention or decision so to act is, on Aristotle's picture, *constituted* by the cognitive dispositions of the agent: so that a man who, confronted with a certain morally significant situation, did not decide to act in the morally appropriate way, would just not be *seeing* the relevant facts, or at any rate not seeing them in the right way. The volitional does not comprise an input over and above the cognitive, properly taken.

The subsumption of the volitional under the cognitive is not peculiar to Aristotle; it pervades Greek thought. For Plato, all three parts of soul have their ἐπιθυμίαι and ἀρχαί (*Rep.* 580d8). Hesiod wrote:

> εἰ γάρ τίς κ' ἐθέλῃι τὰ δίκαι' ἀγορεῦσαι
> γινώσκων, τῶι μέν τ' ὄλβον διδοῖ εὐρύοπα Ζεύς·
>
> (*Op.* 280–1)

[14] See now V. Cessi, *Erkennen und Handeln in der Theorie des Tragischen bei Aristoteles* (Frankfurt/Main, 1987), *passim*, esp. the discussion of relevant Aristotelian passages, e.g. *De Anima* 414b1–6 at pp. 137ff.; note also one of her main conclusions (p. 248): 'Für Aristoteles ist Wahrnehmen ein unterscheidender, aktiver und spontan werdender Erkenntnisakt, aus dem durch Betätigung des auf ihm beruhenden Vorstellungsvermögens unmittelbar ein Streben (ὄρεξις) zur Handlung entspringt.'

It would be in order here to translate *γινώϲκων* as 'intentionally'. Homer has Nestor encourage his troops as follows:

> *ὃϲ δέ κ' ἀνὴρ ἀπὸ ὧν ὀχέων ἕτερ' ἅρμαθ' ἵκηται,*
> *ἔγχει ὀρεξάϲθαι, ἐπεὶ ἦ πολὺ φέρτερον οὕτω.*
> *ὧδε καὶ οἱ πρότεροι πόλεαϲ καὶ τείχε' ἐπόρθεον,*
> *τόνδε νόον καὶ θυμὸν ἐνὶ ϲτήθεϲϲιν ἔχοντεϲ.*
>
> (*Il.* 4.306–9)

The complex *νόον καὶ θυμὸν* obviously forms a single idea with both cognitive and volitional elements. Seeing the right thing to do, the men did it. There is no logical wedge to be inserted between the seeing and the doing.[15] We are tempted to think of willing as logically independent of seeing. The Greeks, perhaps more coherently or at any rate no less coherently, thought of willing as a special way of seeing. (To subsume the volitional under the cognitive can be regarded as tantamount to denying that the will is logically independent of perception.)

## III

The second more precise version of the general thesis which I shall discuss is the claim, already mentioned, that Homeric heroes do not make proper decisions because their decisions are made for them, either by gods, or by forces internal to the agents themselves.

My treatment of the former of these categories – those decisions which are allegedly made by gods – can be brief, since it has been conclusively demonstrated by several writers, and is now widely accepted, that the intervention of a god in a decision-making process does not derogate from the individual's autonomy or responsibility for the action.[16] Agamemnon blames Zeus for the onset of *ἄτη* which led him to slight Achilles (*Il.* 19.86ff.), but he nevertheless makes amends to Achilles: he does not regard the fact that he was overcome by *ἄτη* as diminishing his responsibility. (Earlier, he blamed himself: with 19.137 compare 9.119.) Athene intervenes to try to prevent Achilles from killing Agamemnon (*Il.* 1.188ff.), but she does not force him into line: I have come, she tells him (1.207ff.), to check your anger, *αἴ κε πίθηαι*. She offers him a threefold recompense for his loss if he heeds her, and finishes: *ϲὺ δ' ἴϲχεο, πείθεο δ' ἡμῖν*. Achilles replies that he ought to obey her, because it is better to do so. Clearly there is no compulsion in this: Achilles could disobey if

[15] On this topic in general see most helpfully A. Dihle, *The Theory of the Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982), ch. 2, although Dihle is in my view unduly pessimistic about the competence of a purely cognitivist system of thought to construct a life-like theory of action. For further Homeric examples, see Fränkel, op. cit. (n. 1), pp. 90–1.

[16] See especially Dodds, op. cit. (n. 11), ch. 1; Lesky, op. cit. (n. 12); E. Wüst, 'Von den Anfängen des Problems der Willensfreiheit', *Rhein. Museum* 101 (1958), 75–91; H. Schwabl, 'Zur Selbstständigkeit des Menschen bei Homer', *Wiener Studien* 67 (1954), 46–64; recently A. Schmitt, 'Athenes Umgang mit den Menschen bei Homer', *Die Alten Sprachen im Unterricht* 29 (1982), 6–23. Lesky shows that we should think of human and divine realms as each possessing its own integrity, but as capable also of working together; so that actions can acquire a 'double aspect'. This conception of the divine and human does not change markedly from Homer to the tragedians (although Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and those of Euripides' dramas which also deploy the device of miraculous divine intervention seem to be an exception). Schmitt argues that divine interventions rarely affect agents in an arbitrary way, but tend to match capabilities and propensities autonomously present in the agents affected. Such divine intervention cannot therefore remove responsibility, because it prompts an agent to do what he might, or would, otherwise have done. An interesting early defence of the thesis that divine intervention in Homer does not detract from human freedom is afforded by Plutarch, *Coriolanus*, ch. 32.

he wished, but chooses not to. Aegisthus does disobey the gods although he is warned by Hermes of the consequences (*Od.* 1.32–43); and Odysseus decides not to take the advice proffered him by Leuçothea (*Od.* 5.333ff.).

So much for the rôle of the gods. It has also been claimed, initially by Voigt and following him by Snell, that even when Homeric agents act independently of gods, they are at the mercy of forces which deprive them of that full degree of autonomy which we require of genuine agency. There is a basic, and rather surprising, confusion here between reasons and causes. Of course if Homeric agents were determined to action by irrational causes – passions, drives and so on – then it would be the case that they did not possess a genuine power of agency. Sometimes Homeric agents – like any agents – are so determined to action, and I shall consider some of these cases in the next section. But it is obviously not *in general* true that Homeric agents are driven to action by passions operating in a brutally causal way on them; quite often they choose courses of action, in a thoroughly self-controlled way, for reasons. Odysseus makes just such a reasoned choice in the passage from *Iliad* 11 which I quoted above.

The mistake which both Snell[17] and Voigt[18] make at this point is to claim that even such selections of courses of action for reasons are not genuine choices, on the grounds that the reasons in turn determine the choice of action. But action which is chosen for reasons is the only genuine sort of action we know: we have no other model. Agents perform actions *for reasons.* There is no suggestion here that reasons mechanically determine action – that is not a convincing model of human agency – but equally there is no *gap* between the reasons for an action and the action, in the sense that an action is performed for its reasons and *for nothing else*; the reasons *and nothing else* rationalise (i.e. make rational sense of) the action. Action which is chosen *for no reason at all* – action on an existentialist model – is simply not recognisable as anything falling under the title of genuine self-conscious agency: it looks much more like movement occasioned by brute irrational impulse. There cannot be many cases of such action in ancient literature; even if there were (I shall discuss one such below, section V), it would be strange to elevate it to the status of the only genuine type of action. Of course that is not what Snell wants: in his view the plays of Aeschylus contain many examples of genuine agency, and Aeschylus' agents do not conduct themselves in an existentialist void. They perform actions for reasons; but so do Homer's agents. What is the difference?

[17] *Aeschylos und das Handeln in Drama*, op. cit. (n. 1), and elsewhere in opp. citt., n. 1.

[18] op. cit. (n. 3), p. 41. Here Voigt suggests that Homer's frequent use of such formulae as δοάccατο κέρδιον εἶναι indicates that the agent is not really *choosing* the course of action which seems better. But the distinction is spurious, as I argue in the text. (Cf. also E. Harrison, 'Notes on Homeric Psychology', *Phoenix* 14 [1960], 63–80, at p. 79: 'Here the poet naturally uses a formula which focuses attention on the content of the decision. We know already *who* is involved on each occasion: all we wish to be told at this point is *what* he decides to do.') Voigt also claims (loc. cit.) that the description of the better course of action as κέρδιον removes it from the moral domain. But the line between the moral and the non-moral is not so easily drawn. A counterexample to the claim is raised by Voigt himself (p. 44): at *Il.* 16.652 Zeus decides that it would be κέρδιον to give Patroclus a bit longer before he is slain by Hector. There is no gain (in Voigt's sense) in this for Zeus: his deliberation and decision relate to what he *ought* to do. Consider too Hector's deliberations at *Il.* 22.99ff. In outline Hector says: it would have been κέρδιον if I had followed Poulydamas' advice (103), but since I didn't do so, it is now κέρδιον to face Achilles in single combat (108). A moral 'ought' must be implicit in the second κέρδιον (Hector later replaces it by βέλτερον, 129); so that it is senseless to deny it to the first κέρδιον. Only someone who thought that prudential considerations always *excluded* moral considerations could fail to see this. But a course of action may be moral precisely because it is prudent.

In his discussion of the passage quoted above from *Iliad* 11, Voigt suggests[19] that it is wrong to speak here of a genuine decision on Odysseus' part, because he does not really think of the reason which he settles on as *his own*; he simply remembers the norm which guides men of his social position, and acts accordingly. There are two points which need to be made here. The first is that *no* case of reasoned decision-making is going to be good enough for Voigt, because all such cases simply do involve an agent confronting himself with reasons which appeal to him because they answer to generally applicable norms of conduct of which he approves. He does not magic out of thin air a set of one-off reasons keyed to an unheard-of array of norms – that would take us back to the existentialist agent. He falls back on reasons which have a certain objective status, in the sense that they would, he must believe, appeal to any comparable agent similarly circumstanced.

Odysseus rests on the principle that as an ἀγαθός he ought not to retreat. He could question whether he wants to be an ἀγαθός,[20] but were he to do so, and then act against the principles proper to an ἀγαθός, he would again have to do so *for reasons* – reasons which would lay claim to having objective status in the above sense. One set of reasons can only be questioned on the basis of another set of reasons: you cannot escape from reasons as the basis of any rational action you hope to perform, and in so far as your action is rational, your reasons for it must enjoy this objective status. Even if Homeric agents were only capable of reasoning within stereotypical categories – a charge levelled by Voigt – that would not go to show that they are not genuine agents. It would just show that they were genuine agents of a rather mundane and stereotypical sort. An agent's reasons may be thin and stereotypical, or they may be rich and interesting, but they cannot be radically *individual*, at least not if the agent is rational. A rational agent must choose reasons which would appeal to any other rational agent similarly circumstanced (the Kantian principle of universalisability). Aeschylean agents are no better off than Homer's agents in this respect.[21]

In fact Homer's agents are capable of reasoning which is not stereotypical; this is the second point. Compare with Odysseus' deliberations the deliberations of Menelaus in the seventeenth book of the *Iliad* (91–105). Menelaus is defending Patroclus' body, and like Odysseus he is faced with the onset of superior numbers of Trojans: he has to decide whether to hold his ground or retreat. Menelaus considers the argument which swayed Odysseus – that it would be cowardly to retreat – expressing the point in terms of the αἰδώς he would feel, and the νέμεσις he would incur, if he retreated. But he wonders whether respecting his feeling of αἰδώς is worth the cost of being surrounded by the enemy. At this point the decisive consideration occurs to him: since Hector is fighting θεόφιν, there is no shame in giving way before him. Finally he resolves to seek out Ajax: if the two of them could resist Hector – divinely aided though he be – and rescue Patroclus' body, that would be the best of a bad situation.

[19] op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 87ff. Cf. Snell, *Gesam. Schrift.*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 21.

[20] *Contra* Voigt, ibid. (cf. Snell, *Szenen*, op. cit. [n. 1], p. 18), who claims that such a questioning would not be open to a Homeric agent. But to question the standards of conduct in which he has been brought up, and which his social position demands of him, is precisely what Achilles does in his speech to the embassy at *Il.* 9.397ff.

[21] cf. Lloyd-Jones, op. cit. (n. 10), p. 240: '... all the time in ordinary life we automatically act in accordance with principles whose observance, by what Aristotle calls *ethismos*, has become a matter of habit; this does not mean that if called upon to justify those principles we would prove unable to do so.' Lloyd-Jones could have written this last clause as: 'this does not mean that such action is not genuine action, performed by the agent as a matter of his autonomous and self-conscious choice.' What Lloyd-Jones wrote is equivalent to my version, since the type of action alluded to in my version is the very type of action we can be called upon to justify.

I see no reason why we should not acknowledge that Menelaus is aware here of a truth which Euripides' Phaedra was to make explicit (*Hipp.* 385–7) – that there is bad αἰδώϲ as well as good αἰδώϲ.[22] Bad αἰδώϲ would in this situation amount to falling back on the rule of thumb that ἀγαθοί do not retreat. But Menelaus does not give way to the temptation to reason in this off-the-peg manner; he realises that αἰδώϲ is not the morally relevant category in his situation. Here and now the morally relevant fact is that if he stood his ground he would be cut off and surrounded (94–5). Normally only a coward would think like that, but the crucial difference here is that Hector is fighting 'from a god': only fools fight with gods (98–9); the Danaans are well aware of this, and will consequently withold their νέμεϲιϲ from him (100–1). Menelaus achieves a moral sophistication and insight in advance of acting such as Phaedra is only able to attain after she has (disastrously) acted.[23]

Menelaus in effect uses one moral norm (only fools fight the gods) to discount the course of action recommended by another norm (only cowards retreat); the sophistication of his reasoning derives from the fact that, to a man of Menelaus' standing and temperament, the second of these norms carries considerable weight with him. It is no small achievement that he is able to withstand its allure.[24] Let me stress once again – since it is so easy to go wrong here – that the fact that Menelaus counteracts one norm with *another norm* does not rob his decision of autonomy. *All* rational action operates within a context of norms of conduct. (The principles may not always be codifiable – a point stressed by Aristotle.) But the fact that action is principled – and so in a certain sense not individualistic – does not render it lacking in autonomy, or derogate from the full self-consciousness of the agent who so acts. On the contrary, action which is *not principled* – in the sense of not resting on principles which, if formulated, could enjoy general appeal – is not recognisable as genuinely rational action (simply: action) at all.

Here again the lexical method shows its deficiencies. The fact that Homeric decisions are never labelled as such[25] – they are never signalled by such verbs as αἱρεῖν or αἱρεῖϲθαι – does nothing to impugn their status as decisions. One of the most important crises in the *Iliad* is Achilles' decision to return to the fighting, thereby bringing upon himself a short but glorious life. I shall not trace the working out of this decision, since this has been admirably done by Schadewaldt.[26] Again, the absence of an explicit linguistic flag cannot render the decision which Achilles quite evidently makes in any sense unreal or not genuine. The crucial point comes in the eighteenth book, when Achilles tells his mother that he has resolved to take revenge on Hector for Patroclus' death. If you do, she says, you will not live long, since your

[22] For an elucidation of the distinction as it applies to Phaedra, see Barrett's commentary *ad loc.*

[23] Compare Odysseus' deliberation in Polyphemus' cave (*Od.* 9.295–306). He is initially tempted to stab Polyphemus – as one would expect of any hero in his circumstance – but he is restrained by a ἕτεροϲ θυμόϲ (303) which suggests a more intelligent policy. And as with Menelaus, second thoughts are best. Contrast Phaedra, for whom second thoughts (436) are worse. Again, the fact that Odysseus' deliberation is described in terms of lobbying θυμοί does not impugn the unitary status of his self. Rather, it is a vivid way of conveying the fact that ideas just do *occur* to one (out of nowhere, as it seems). But they occur to *one*, i.e. to the unitary, acting self. Homer can represent decisions which, as it seems, simply 'happen' to one as owing to the intervention of a god (e.g. Phoenix's decision not to murder his father, *Il.* 9.458ff.). There is nothing especially primitive in this: it is one way of portraying a type of process which is not perspicuous to the agent himself.

[24] Not surprisingly, Voigt, op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 92ff. cannot cope with the sophistication and intelligence of Menelaus' reasoning; he has to suggest – wholly implausibly – that Menelaus does select a cowardly course of action.

[25] Voigt, op. cit. (n. 3), pp. 17–18.

[26] 'Die Entscheidung des Achilleus', in *Von Homers Werk und Welt* (Leipzig, 1944), pp. 162–95.

death stands waiting behind Hector's death. Then let me die, replies Achilles – αὐτίκα τεθναίην (98) – since I could not save my friend. How can one seriously deny that *τεθναίην contains* Achilles' decision? In willing, with full awareness, its necessary consequence, Achilles thereby wills the decision.

## IV

Animals clearly make choices in some sense – a dog might choose to go for the bone over here rather than the stick over there, but there nevertheless seems to be something to the denial that they make *genuine* decisions: at least, they do not seem to make decisions in full self-awareness of what they are doing. Descartes surely had a point with his 'agitur, non agit'. One reason which might be suggested why animals cannot make genuine decisions is that they do not possess the concept of a decision; they do not possess that concept because they do not possess a language. Roughly, they cannot think because they cannot talk.[27] As far as sheer decision-making is concerned, I have argued that the fact that Homeric heroes do not conceive of their decisions *as such* does nothing to impugn the status of those decisions as genuine decisions. But why then cannot dogs make genuine decisions? It must make a difference here that dogs have no language at all, whereas Homeric heroes have a sufficiently rich vocabulary – and, in particular, mental vocabulary – for mindedness to be in place. Gaps at the linguistic level being exceptional, and very few in number, they do not make for gaps at the ontological level. It is easy to underestimate how much is presupposed by the life-like portrayal of a human being. When all of that structure and detail is in place, the sheer absence of a few lexical items is not necessarily going to have repercussions at the ontological level. The creation can in one sense break free of its creator: it may possess power and capacities for which it has no name; it has no name for them because the creator has no name for them. The absence of a name or two here and there, in the context of command of a coherent language, may be too small a deficiency to undermine the completeness and thoroughgoingness of the mental ontology available to such a creature.

The picture emerging is obviously a slightly complicated one: although the difference between a dog and a Homeric hero is very great, it does not seem to be incommensurably great. That is perhaps what one would expect.[28] But without exploring the differences along the very general line just mentioned – difference in point of possession or otherwise of a whole language – I think there is a major distinction to be made at the level of decision-making itself. An animal cannot *reflect* on its decisions, whereas a human being can. Do Homeric heroes reflect on their decisions? The case of Achilles in dialogue with his mother after the death of Patroclus springs to mind at once, but rather than tackle the question absolutely literally, and so in a sense question-beggingly, I want now to avail myself of the third way in which Snell renders his denial of full self-consciousness to Homeric heroes precise. Homeric heroes do not make decisions reflectively, Snell says, because they

[27] For this general line, see L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, e.g. 650, 'Wir sagen, der Hund fürchtet, sein Herr werde ihn schlagen; aber nicht: er fürchte, sein Herr werde ihn morgen schlagen. Warum nicht?', and *passim*. The dog would need to be able to *talk* about tomorrow to be able to *think* about it. See also some of the papers of Donald Davidson collected in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984), especially the paper entitled 'Thought and Talk'.

[28] Since the difference between a dog and *any* human being is not incommensurably great. After all, a dog *can* fear that his master will beat him (that is already a significant achievement, denied to lower animals), even if he cannot fear that his master will beat him tomorrow.

are not capable of akrasia.[29] The guiding idea is this: only an agent who is sometimes capable of being at the mercy of forces, and who at these times knows and regrets that this is happening to him, is capable (at other times) of making genuine decisions, in the sense of decisions which are not the outcome of a simple interaction of forces. I think this is a powerful idea. Waiving the fact that Socrates denied the existence of akrasia – surely an unsatisfying way out of the philosophical problems which the phenomenon undoubtedly raises – there is something appealing in the thought that if you are not *always* to be a helpless victim of drives and passions, you must *sometimes* be (or be capable of being) just such a victim, while being simultaneously aware that that is what you are. Only an agent for whom incontinence (and, equally, continence) is a possibility can achieve the distance from his drives and passions requisite to assure him that he is something over and above those forces. To be able to observe the conflict of its desires is integral to the ability of a self to think of itself as a unitary item, forced to choose among – and hence not constituted by – the array of disparate desires clamouring for its attention.[30]

Snell denies that Homer's creatures are capable of akrasia; in contradistinction, Euripidean heroines such as Phaedra and Medea are said to be capable of it. But consider Helen at *Il.* 3.383ff. Aphrodite has rescued Paris from death at the hands of Menelaus in single combat, and has placed him, bathed in fragrance, in his bridal chamber. Then she comes to Helen, who has been watching the combat from the walls of Troy. She disguises herself as an old woman, and tries to persuade Helen to go to Paris; but Helen sees through the disguise, and refuses: it would be νεμεccητόν; let the goddess go to Paris herself, even forsake the ways of the Olympians and marry him, since she cares for him so much. Aphrodite waxes wroth, and threatens to hate Helen as much as she now passionately loves her. Helen is cowed, and follows the goddess in silence to the chamber. There Paris is waiting for her. At first Helen chides him, saying he ought to have stayed on the battlefield and fallen to Menelaus, who is a better man than he. Go now, she bids him, and re-enter the fray. But no, she continues, bethinking herself, do not go after all, for you might be killed. Paris stays, and they make love, while on the plain Menelaus searches in vain for his vanished foe.

This seems to me to be a clear case of akratic action. Helen really knows the truth: that Paris ought to fight Menelaus to the finish, even if he is killed. That she knows this is shown by her first reply to Aphrodite and her initial words to Paris himself. This self-knowledge also emerges in the self-conscious way she weaves the Trojan War and all its suffering, undertaken for her sake, into her web (3.125–8); and in her feelings of self-disgust: she tells Priam she wishes she had died on that day she followed Paris to Troy, calling herself a slut (κυνῶπις, 180); to Aphrodite she calls herself hateful (cτυγερή, 404), and to Hector a terrible evil-intriguing bitch (κύων κακομηχάνοc ὀκρυοέcca, 6.344). And yet she gives way to her disastrous passion, which in her later words to Hector she ascribes to the gods (6.344ff.), just as Priam ascribes the responsibility for the war not to her, but to the gods (3.164–5). That

[29] *Gesam. Schrift.*, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 59. Cf. Fränkel, op. cit. (n. 1), p. 87, for the suggestion that Hamlet represents a type inaccessible to Homer. Hamlet's akrasia is marked not by the impact of a desire to act in a way contrary to what, all things considered, has been judged to be best, but rather by the *absence* of a desire to realise in action the preferred practical judgement. This type is not only inaccessible to Homer, but to classical thought in general, which would not have been able to make sense of an agent who has preponderating reasons for action, but nevertheless does not act; or indeed of an agent – such as Camus's Stranger – who has no appropriate reason for action, but nevertheless acts.

[30] Aristotle also makes the point that animals are not capable of akrasia, although his reason is that they are not capable of forming universal concepts (*NE* 1147b4–6).

Helen's passion is represented by the goddess Aphrodite[31] should not of course deter us from ascribing it fully to Helen herself: that is, as I have observed, a fundamental parameter of Homeric interpretation. In any case, we have in the present scene a double instance of akrasia: Helen first resists Aphrodite, then succumbs; first chides Paris, then again succumbs. It is clear that the two acts of succumbing are doublets: one operates on a partly divine plane, the other on a purely human plane. But as far as Helen's psychology is concerned, the same process is going on each time.

Aristotle insisted (*NE.* 7.3) that the akratic agent is in a sense aware of how he should act, and in a sense not, like a man asleep or drunk.[32] Or, one might add, like someone overcome by a god (a passion) and forced to act accordingly. The akratic agent, on Aristotle's model, is in full possession of the major premiss of the relevant practical syllogism, but his perception of the situation is in some way damaged by the impact of an ἐπιθυμία, so that he in some sense fails to see the situation straight.[33] I abstract somewhat from the precise details of Aristotle's account, which is riddled with difficulty, both textual and argumentational. But the general outline of the account is clear, and it seems fair to abstract sufficiently far to say that the akratic man's *knowledge* of what he should do (interlocking with his pursuit, in general, of eudaimonia) remains intact at the moment of weakness, while some aspect of his *perception* of the situation (in particular, his perception of the fact that this is a situation to which his overall knowledge is relevant) is what 'goes for a Burton'.[34] This surely fits Helen's case. She knows what Paris should do, and initially tells him to return to battle, even if that means his death; but she loves him and does not want to see him killed, so giving way to her desire she contradicts her command and bids him stay, *lest* he be killed. Aristotle remarks that the akratic man may, like a man asleep or drunk, come round from his akrasia. And that is exactly what happens to Helen: when we next hear of her, she is trying to persuade Paris to return to the fighting (6.337–8).

Two further passages in the *Iliad* seem to me to illustrate cases of akrasia: Achilles' reply to Ajax at 9.644–55, and Hector's flight at 22.136–7. After Ajax's plea to

[31] She represents, as Voigt correctly observes (op. cit. [n. 3], p. 67), Helen's 'Wesen und Vergangenheit'.

[32] Aristotle's model of akrasia is a cognitivist one: the failure is characterised as one of knowledge rather than of will. Democritus' treatment of akrasia is also strongly cognitivist (B53, 53a); Theognis (631) and Euripides (*Medea* 1078–80, *Hipp.* 373–87) give less explicitly cognitivist descriptions, but are not couched in anything like the terms of a modern notion of the will. Again, I do not see any disadvantage in the cognitivist approach: its critics (e.g. Dihle, op. cit. [n. 15]), have difficulty expressing exactly *what*, other than a piece of terminology, it misses out.

[33] See here J. McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *Monist* 62 (1979), 331–50; D. Wiggins, 'Weakness of Will, Commensurability and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire', repr. in Rorty (ed.), op. cit. (n. 4), pp. 241–65; Cessi, op. cit. (n. 14), esp. pp. 228ff.

[34] This is not quite how Aristotle presents the matter. He locates the impact of the desire at the minor premiss – rather than at the mental putting together of major and minor premisses – but this conflates akrasia with the sort of mistake with which *NE* 3.1 deals, and is anyway implausible. He cannot locate the impact at the conclusion (*contra* A. Kenny, *Aristotle's Theory of the Will* [London, 1979], pp. 161f.), since for Aristotle (in keeping with Greek cognitivism) there is no logical gap between conclusion and action (*NE* 1147a25–31, *De Motu* 701a8–25). Wiggins (art. cit., previous note, pp. 249–50) suggests that unless the gap is present, no room is left for syllogisms to compete with one another, and so for the akratic man to struggle. But the akratic man struggles – one might so put it – to *draw* the conclusion. Desire, backing the worse syllogism, interferes with his ability to hold on to the combination of major and minor premiss of the better syllogism. The syllogisms themselves are in conflict not in the sense that their conclusions actually do compete with each other – since not both conclusions are reached – but in the sense that they potentially generate incompatible conclusions.

Achilles to return to the fighting, Achilles tells Ajax, in effect, that he is right, but that χόλος prevents him, Achilles, from acceding to the plea. But we note that Achilles no longer threatens to leave Troy the next day; instead he will stay, but not consider returning to the front before Hector is fighting around the huts and burning the ships. Achilles knows that his withdrawal is now unjustified: Agamemnon has offered due amends and he should accept them. But he is prevented from acting on this knowledge by a passion which arises uncontrollably in his heart, disabling his reason. Anger as a basis of akratic action is a well-recognised phenomenon, and is given thorough treatment by Aristotle (*NE.* 7.6), who points to four extenuating features of such akrasia, three of which are exemplified by Achilles. Firstly, Aristotle writes, such akrasia is based on λόγος rather than ἐπιθυμία. Achilles makes it clear that there is a reason for his anger: it arises every time he recalls how he was slighted, and treated as though he were a μέτοικος without τίμη. Secondly, Aristotle says that anger is a natural emotion – that obviously applies all the more to a Homeric hero, for whom anger is the sanction of his τίμη. Thirdly, it is an open, guileless emotion. Achilles exemplifies this in the honest and straightforward way he speaks to the embassy. Fourthly, it is not pleasurable to the angry man, but pains him. This does not apply to Achilles, who later describes the sensation of anger as sweeter than flowing honey in the breast. (It is in any case unclear that Aristotle is right about this fourth mark of anger-based akrasia.)

Finally, when Hector faces Achilles he is overcome by fear and turns on his heels. Again, this is a straightforward case of akrasia. Hector really knows that he should go to meet Achilles: nothing else can save him from the charge, which he fears may be levelled at him, of having wantonly destroyed his people. But in keeping with the cognitivist model of akratic action, Hector cannot keep hold of the knowledge. He has to remind himself twice of his present duty (22.108–10, 129–30), and in between these reminders he engages in a long reflection on the possibility of trying to negotiate with Achilles. But he really knows that negotiation would be useless, that his reflections are pointless: the long protasis (111–21) in which he dwells on the terms he might offer Achilles is given no apodosis. Instead, he recalls himself to his senses: 'ἀλλὰ τίη μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξατο θυμός;' he asks (122). 'If I went up to him unarmed, he would slay me just as I am, like a woman. Now there is no way to whisper to him from a tree or a rock like a maid and a youth, as a maid and a youth whisper to one another. No, I must fight him, and we shall see to which of us Zeus grants the victory.' In the whole of Hector's soliloquy he is constantly trying to hold on to the knowledge that he must stand and face Achilles, that there is no alternative, but the knowledge is all the time slipping from him. Hector has the knowledge in one way, and in another way he does not have it (cf. *NE* 1147a11–14): before the trembling seizes his limbs, he has already fallen victim to akrasia. He dies as a man before his body dies.[35]

[35] It may of course be the case, as Walter Nicolai points out to me (and see his 'Wirkungsabsichten des Iliasdichters' in Kurz, Müller, Nicolai [edd.], *Gnomosyne, Festschrift für Walter Marg* [Munich, 1981], at p. 99) that Hector's reflections at 22.111–21 hit on a policy – handing back Helen and making financial reparations – which it would have been politically intelligent to pursue; and again that his flight represents a course of action – avoidance of combat with Achilles – which has until this point justified itself as the most practical way of defending Troy. But what is decisive for Hector's akrasia is not what *is* the case, but what he *thinks* is the case; and his judgement, whether right or wrong, is that neither negotiation nor avoidance of combat is here and now morally possible for him. Hence his flight is an act of moral weakness.

## V

I do not see any essential difference between the cases of akrasia I have described, and those to be found in the plays of Euripides. Euripidean heroes possess, to be sure, greater powers of self-analysis; but the phenomenon which they analyse is firmly in place in the Homeric mind. On all three counts which I have examined, Homeric decision-making stands up as a fully self-conscious, autonomous activity. The progress from Homer to the tragedians does not show a development in the area of the self. But there is, as I conceded at the beginning, *some* sort of difference between decisions made by heroes in Homer and those made by heroes in tragedy. What is it? I can only offer, in closing, some very general hints as to where I believe one should look for these differences.

The tragedians are morally more complex than Homer: more, and more difficult, factors enter the decisions of their heroes. Decision-making becomes something which is difficult, and itself tragic, if its consequences are unavoidably bad however one decides. The psychology of ἀμηχανία emerges as a topic of increasing interest through lyric poetry to tragedy.[36] The initial moves in this general trend are already discernible in the *Odyssey*, as for example Penelope's anxieties over Telemachus (4.787ff.), or Odysseus' uncertainty whether to punish the faithless maidservants (an uncertainty itself masking a deeper hesitation to confront the suitors on his own: 20.1ff.). But the cases of ἀμηχανία which the *Odyssey* presents lie far from tragedy. And while Achilles' decision in the *Iliad* to avenge his friend is to be sure tragic, it is so in a different and much simpler sense than Agamemnon's in the Hymn to Zeus, or than that of Pelasgus or Orestes. Achilles has no difficulty reaching his decision: he faces no insoluble moral dilemma, with disaster threatening him on either side of the choice. All that is required of him is courage, and that is a virtue which he can unproblematically supply. The Aeschylean heroes I have mentioned, on the other hand, face dilemmas with moral demands on either side which are so compelling, that the dilemmas are, if not actually insoluble, as good as insoluble for the agents concerned. To solve them requires thought which, Pelasgus says, can go as deep as a diver: not into the soul, as Snell avers – that is not the area of search, and there is nothing to be found there – but into the *issue*, so as to make the right decision for the city and the suppliants.

The soul is not the right area of search because the difficulty in a moral dilemma is a difficulty in the world and not in the self: Agamemnon balances the *objective* demands made on him by the behest of Artemis, his duty to the army and his feeling for his daughter. Pelasgus tries to ascertain from the suppliants whether the sons of Aegyptus have an *objective* legal claim on them. The maidens fail to satisfy him on this point, and instead threaten the city with an appalling pollution. That settles the matter for Pelasgus, who has to take the risk of future disaster to avert the desecration of Zeus' altar. Orestes at the moment of crisis asks Pylades what he should do, and adds μητέρ' αἰδεcθῶ κτανεῖν. There is nothing personal about this: anyone in his position ought to shudder to kill his own mother.

But there is a sense in which if a dilemma is simply insoluble then it cannot be tragic. That is the view implicit in Euripides' treatment of Agamemnon's dilemma in his *Iphigeneia in Aulis*. Agamemnon cannot decide what to do – there is really no deciding (the tension is resolved by Iphigeneia's decision) – and hence, in Euripides' treatment, no sense of tragedy. Agamemnon is in the position of the existentialist

[36] See, e.g., Sappho 102, 130 L–P, Archilochus 7, 67d, with Snell, *Szenen*, op. cit. (n. 1), ch. 2.

agent:[37] the world offers up no preponderating reason, the options are perfectly balanced, and so in a certain sense it doesn't matter what he does. Euripides shows that when *ἀμηχανία* is pushed to its limit it ceases to generate tragedy.

The agent who finds himself in the dilemma of Euripides' Agamemnon is not in a position of special self-awareness or autonomy: far from it. Such a self is perforce thrown back, as it were, on its own resources. But then a self *has* no resources of its own: it stands in permanent need of something which can only be supplied by the world – namely reasons for action, reasons which speak satisfyingly and compellingly for the courses of action to which they are keyed. The self which finds itself located in a world which does not tell it clearly and unambiguously what it must do is a poor and forlorn object, since it is not possible to conjure certainty into a world which otherwise affords none. Such a manoeuvre is no more than a shallow trick, and no respectable theory of knowledge can give it house-room.[38] Euripides' Agamemnon might well envy the lot of his Homeric counterpart: for Homer's agents live in a world which repeatedly and generously serves them up preponderating reasons for action. So far from enslaving or doing away with the agent, such a world – this is the paradox of freedom – can alone set him free.[39]

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[37] As Snell brings out in his discussion of the play in *Aischylos und das Handeln*, op. cit. (n. 1).

[38] I mean to oppose the positions taken up by David Wiggins in his 'Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life', *Proc. Brit. Acad.* (1976), 331–78, and Bernard Williams in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, 1985). Their respective recipes for bridging the gulf between unforthcoming world and beleaguered self – invention, confidence – only succeed in making terribly clear how unbridgeable the gulf is. If your decision is not constrained, then to the extent that it is not constrained it will be (*contra* Wiggins, p. 373) arbitrary. Equally, if you are not certain, it is no use pretending that you are.

[39] The paradox consists in this: when we reflect philosophically on the prerequisites for freedom, we are inclined to think that the agent must be confronted with a range of incommensurable possible courses of action, among which he is unconstrainedly free to choose, without prejudice to his rationality; but the fact remains that when we reflect on our actual practice, actions which are selected for preponderating reasons (actions which are *better* than their alternatives would have been) are our central cases of free, rational action.