II. PHILOSOPHICAL CLARIFICATIONS OF PSYCHIATRY

Shay's *Thymos* and Homer's *Thymos*: How a Failure in Epistemological Discipline Has Limited the Current Moral Injury Discourse

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Abstract

With the alarming rise of physical reductivism in contemporary psychiatry, philosophy struggles to maintain its place as an essential way of "knowing" and to challenge the epistemological incomplexities of neuroscientific theorizing as a foundation for human wellness. Given the opening that the "moral injury" discourse grants to philosophers interested in impacting contemporary psychiatric care, and given the underexamined importance of the Greek anthropological term *thymos* in Jonathan Shay's original moral injury formulation, this article critiques Shay's original missteps in cross-contextual application of the term, re-examines Homeric *thymos* in the original language, and offers avenues for re-vivifying the discourse by appealing to Homer with greater epistemological vigilance.

Introduction

In the past 30 years, survivors of various acute forms of adversity who develop any kind of painful or disorienting response are increasingly referred to a mental health agency or professional for care, after which they are increasingly placed into summary mental health programs which address their responses as mental illness, determined by criteria from the traumatic stress disorders spectrum of the psychiatric paradigm. Although it is certain that many survivors of adversity do ex-

perience one or more symptoms outlined within this paradigm, the literature suggests that the total number of survivors of any common category of acute adversity that are candidates for clear psychiatric diagnosis—even those in considerable pain or distress—totals less than 20%. This leaves a cross-section of at least 80% of adversity survivors whose painful or disorienting responses to adversity cannot be summarily addressed by psychiatry. To be clear, this does not indicate that the distress of this 80% is necessarily less complex or less painful than the other 20%. It simply indicates that the features of the distress of the 80% cannot be clearly and adequately addressed by the psychiatric paradigm alone, using its diagnostic criteria.

At least two dangers, then, have arisen, in managed care: (1) the pathologization of suffering, in which painful but expected responses to adversity are labeled as "disorders" without adequately complex scrutiny, and (2) the medicalization of extraordinary responses to adversity, in which the development of unusual features, which can perhaps be partly explained either physiologically or behaviorally under the psychiatric paradigm but which cannot be accounted for in their totality, become pressed into psychiatric categories anyway, for the benefit of introducing survivors to managed care as quickly as possible. Thankfully, these dangers have not gone completely unnoticed. Indeed, survivors whose complex distress has seemed resistant to professional care have gained notoriety in American society, especially in conjunction with a steady expansion in both research and practice around the philosophical-therapeutic category of "moral injury," first pioneered by Jonathan Shay.[1]

Moral injury as a contemporary discourse was made possible by Shay's expansion of the philosophical presuppositions of modern trauma care—presuppositions he did not find to be adequate. A career psychiatrist dedicated to veteran care, Shay claims to have found the grounds for his critique incidentally. In the late 1980's, while providing psychiatric care for a group of American Vietnam war veterans, he came across some significant similarities between his client's most complex features, some of which were not fully accounted for in the psychiatric paradigm, and Homer's description of combat-related distress present in ancient

[1] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 20.

Greek warfare and homecoming. Shay carefully re-read *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, making notes on Homer's social observations, combat narratives, and homecoming narratives, and eventually published a book about their potential use in contemporary trauma care, as a hopeful contribution to better understanding complex conditions of rage, moral disorientation, and meaninglessness after combat.[2] Shay's challenge to the psychiatric community was direct: "[Homer captures] the bitter experiences that actually do arise in war…[and] has seen things that we in psychiatry and psychology have more or less missed."[3] His thesis was that Homer had an ability to understand the first-hand, existential descriptions of the distress of returning warriors because he had a broader understanding of the human experience than can be found in modern medical approaches to illness.

Shay's development of the moral injury paradigm was reasonable, thorough, and full of vignettes and concrete applications for veteran care. It was immediately received by many prominent scholars and practitioners alike, and, indeed, in the more than twenty years since the first publication of *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay's category of moral injury as an application of the ancient Greek philosophical anthropology of Homer to the complex distress and disorientation of returning combat veterans has become an essential part of American trauma care. It has gained such prominence that the National Center for PTSD considers moral injury to be a major paradigm in PTSD care, regardless of its continued omission in the diagnostic manuals.[4] The landmark philosophical feature of Shay's application of Homer's epic poetry to the condition of contemporary combat veterans is the assertion that the violation of conscience in combat can affect veterans in ways that cannot be fully explained by modern scientific approaches to human anthropology.[5] Shay found this to be a constant theme among his veterans, who used distinctly moral and philosophical language in the description of their combat experiences and the difficulties of their homecomings. He also found it as a constant in Homer's writing, as the most disoriented of Homer's

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2 Ibid., xiii.

3 Ibid.

4 William Nash, T. L. Carper, and M. A. Mills, "Psychometric Evaluation of the Moral Injury Events Scale," *Military Medicine* 178.6 (2008): 646-652.

5 Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, xiii.

warriors were described as being injured at the place of *thymos*, or, in Greek philosophical anthropology, the seat of both human emotion and human moral instinct.[6]

As a professional psychotherapist, and educator who was originally trained in the classics, Shay's work has become a fascination for me ever since 2004, when I began traveling abroad to work with survivors of complex and acute political violence. However, perhaps unlike most other moral injury enthusiasts—in fact, unlike every other moral theorist I have found to date in the literature—my fascination has not been one of utility, in which I maintain the primary interest of applying Shay's ideas directly to my own work, or expanding upon them as a foundation for my own work. Rather, my interest has been in understanding his epistemological movement as a dedicated physical scientist towards annexing a 5,000-year-old anthropological construction into contemporary psychiatric care. Shay abruptly interrupted his commentary on the Greek philosophical concept of *thymos* after the publication of *Odysseus in America* in 2002, and I can find no contemporary theorists directly addressing *thymos* in the literature today—in spite of the fact that it is easy to find theorists building on almost every other developmental foundation of Shay's original paradigm. Shay has, at least by evidence of the absence of the concept in his later publications, relegated his treatment of the idea of *thymos* to a lesser, perhaps originally developmental task, and one which no longer holds prime interest for him.

However, it is precisely his interrupted treatment of Homer's usage of *thymos* that proves to be Shay's most interesting work to me, and perhaps to other social philosophers as well. Certainly it was the closest Shay came to engaging the actual work of philosophy himself. After all, if seeking to develop cross-contextual, cross-cultural applications from ancient literature that might prove useful to a contemporary scientific practice, should not any scholar wish to do the work of understanding the original author's material in cultural and philosophical context? However, it is clear that even when Shay was developing the ancient idea of *thymos* in his works, and especially in *Odysseus in America*, he did so in a manner that did not privilege a clear understanding of Homer's contextual worldview but rather in a manner that more expedi-

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[6] Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America* (New York: Scribner Press, 2002), 12.

ently supported his own work with veterans, including the use of contemporary concepts such as narcissistic stability, megalomania, and positive individualism. He is quite open about this in *Odysseus in America*: "in this book I have asked readers to adopt [my] modern definition of the…word *thymos*.[7] He describes why he has decided to depart from the context of the ancient and original context for the term, despite warnings from his colleagues that it would be a dangerously "ahistorical and universalizing approach to Homer's content."[8] His defense takes this form: "the content of *thymos* is historically and culturally constructed… I use Homer's words in this effort not because I believe that the ancient Greeks [had ultimate knowledge] but because…[they] were profoundly interested in *thymos* and we can learn from what they said about it."[9]

And here, in essence, we find Shay's undeveloped epistemology-of-approach in approaching Homeric *thymos*, which I believe may have been eventually corrected or improved upon if he had continued his pursuit of Homer and classical Greek philosophical anthropology. Shay remains self-consciously distant from the historical and philosophical contexts of Homer's presuppositions even while appealing to him for use of the term *thymos,* and his logic in justifying this seems to be that any term or idea from any time or place can be decontextualized and recontextualized with impunity, because culture is always changing, and therefore no specific culture has the right to define its own terms indefinitely. That may be reasonable, from a certain point of view, and it is certainly connected to his understanding of morality, which he believes to be a constantly changing social contract that represents the fluid dynamics of convention, order, and mutual expectations in a society.[10] It may also be expedient for him as a scientist. However, there are of course inherent dangers to be navigated when using this logic. Primarily, there is the danger of one's own presuppositions becoming the only objective reality in one's research, to the point of subjectivizing all conflicting presuppositions. One of the most overlooked factors in research that can compromise reliable results is when a researcher carries phi-

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7 Ibid., 247.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 23-37.

losophical assumptions into the work which conflict with the assumptions of the persons or institutions under examination, and does not account for this conflict in his or her methodology. This warning almost goes without saying in the work of philosophy, but it does not appear clear that Shay has adequately heeded this warning, and the results in his works are, I believe, evident.

Shay's thymos

It will be my aim for the balance of this article to examine *thymos* in the Homeric literature in a summary manner, according to my own reading of the texts in the original language and bolstered at times by a few published classicists who seem to share my view—who of course share it from a position of greater scholarly scrutiny than I am probably able to manage. The reason I consider this piece a contribution to further discussion among social philosophers is that public scrutiny has not before been given to the results of Shay's seemingly inadequate epistemological approach to Homeric literature, as described above. I will continue by offering some respectful comments about where Shay may have missed the opportunity to fully apply some rich understandings of Homeric *thymos* to his work, due to his gaps in epistemology. After this, I will attempt to provide a definitive and coherent summary of Homer's use of *thymos* from my reading of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and to provide some suggestions for further exploration towards more contextual contemporary cross-cultural application, with an eye towards those who work with contemporary adversity survivors in the Western world.

In a number of places in his work, Shay succeeds in defining *thymos* in generally Homeric ways, for instance calling it the "noble fighting heart of a warrior," and the generator of "heroism, boldness, and courage."[11] Indeed, Homer uses *thymos* in this way more than 30 times in his epic poems. Shay also discusses *thymos* as the seat of emotions, and as "that which causes affection" and enables the self to love another.[12] Similarly, Homer uses *thymos* to describe emotional states such as fear, hatred, joy, sadness, love, and bitterness more than 150 times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, by my count. However, beyond these broad

[11] Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 12.
[12] Ibid., 158.

similarities, there are many distinct differences in Homer's use of *thymos* and Shay's usage, and these differences have an impact on Shay's ability to meaningfully appropriate Homer's ideas. Shay discusses *thymos* as that which rouses a warrior to fight for principles of honor that are culturally constructed and constantly changing, and emphasizes this concept of the ultimately movable cultural construction of a warrior's morality at least 12 times in *Odysseus in America*.[13] Although Homer does use *thymos* to describe the aggressive instinct that rouses a warrior to battle 33 times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, in my reading, it is never clear that he is connecting the instinct itself to a *socially constructed* morality. Homer does regularly use the term to describe both an instinct that rouses a person to action and a person's moral sense, and also to describe the way that social expectations may influence a man's actions during combat.[14] However, there is certainly no place in which Homer insinuates that a person's moral intuition is a product of cultural construction. In fact, this would have been generally foreign to philosophers of Homer's day.

Although Homer does clearly associate *thymos* with both aggression and moral intuition, Shirley Sullivan makes clear that Homer's understanding of morality was akin to that of Plato, as a universal absolute rather than the product of social construction.[15] Shay's use of *thymic* morality as a social construction certainly reflects his philosophical presuppositions about how a human being develops and sustains a moral sense, but when these presuppositions are divergent from Homer's, the efficacy of Shay's use of *thymos* to discuss moral disorientation can be called into question. As another example, Shay reflects Homer's use of *thymos* as the seat of moral intuition, but explains that in contemporary terms this can be understood as the function of an "interior psychic mirror" which reflects the self's moral state relative to societal mores.[16] Again it is clear that, for Shay, the moral intuition of a person is essentially informed by historically and socio-culturally constructed content embodied in ideals, ambitions, and attachments, making the human person particularly vulnerable to social and cultural changes in the under-

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[13] Ibid., 12-251.

[14] Shirley Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer* (Montreal: McGill University Queen's Press, 1988), 84-85.

[15] Ibid., 54.

[16] Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 156.

standing of right and wrong.[17] In fact, Shay's writings suggest that, in his opinion, this is the exclusive way that moral intuition is formed, because at no point in either *Achilles in Vietnam* or *Odysseus in America* does he offer an alternative idea. Shay's presentation of *thymic* morality certainly reflects certain cultural assumptions that were foreign to Homer's worldview. Sullivan suggests that, for Homer, *thymos* functions as a moral intuition that is not necessarily connected with moral reasoning, but which can be "open to divine influence," and can aid a warrior in doing what is right outside of what he has been ordered or educated to do.[18]

Another way that Shay allows his philosophical presuppositions to overshadow Homer's presuppositions occurs around the concept of the self, the "I," or the *ego* in its relation to *thymos*.[19] Shay describes *thymos* as essentially an ancient philosophical understanding of "narcissism," in that it involves a deep desire for recognition from society.[20] He argues that in a "fixed inflated state" it can produce megalomania, but in a regulated state it produces a healthy, differentiated position in relationships and social standing.[21] At one point Shay even suggests that *thymos* can be summarized as "the human universal trait of commitment to people, groups, ideals, and ambitions, and of emotional upheaval when these are threatened."[22] Accordingly, for Shay and the moral injury paradigm, when leadership betrayal occurs, it is essentially the warrior's ability to maintain a stable commitment to people and ideals that is damaged, and therefore complex mistrust and meaninglessness ensue. And further, when a warrior enters a "berserk state," it is his narcissistic stability that is compromised, resulting in an entry into a state of extreme megalomania in which his connection to society is damaged through the violation of cultural mores about humane behavior.

Unfortunately, these philosophical constructions are not present in Homer's worldview, because the oldest of them dates back only to the advent of the Enlightenment, which occurred more than 2,400 years after Homer died. Homer does use *thymos* in describing emotional distress

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[17] Ibid., 157.
[18] Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer*, 117.
[19] Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 284.
[20] Ibid., 156.
[21] Ibid., 161.
[22] Ibid., 247.

some 25 times in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but certainly these uses are connected to ancient philosophical understandings of human disorientation rather than contemporary psychiatric or psychological ones. Far from an individual trait of commitment to others, Homer's original understanding of *thymos* most likely reflected the opposite reality: that *thymos* is an essential inner vitality shared between persons, and is most threatened when one individual breaks from the community as a whole—a phenomenon in Homer's writings which I will discuss later in the article.

In the examples above we see a clear presentation of the difficulty of Shay's position. In both *Achilles in Vietnam* and *Odysseus in America* he very clearly and convincingly links Homeric narratives to several of the most complex phenomena associated with veteran disorientation. His work in drawing parallels between Homer's description of the consequences of such events in the lives of ancient warriors and contemporary descriptions of the same consequences in the lives of modern warriors is both thorough and unique in its contribution to the field. However, in importing his own understandings of the human experience, using constructs that not only are foreign to Homer's worldview, but which likely actively contradict Homer's worldview on some occasions, his offering of Homer's ideas to the contemporary world are limited. In fact, it might be said that Shay uses Homer's narratives as simply colorful illustrations of his own personal ideas—ideas which are doubtless profound, but which are also doubtlessly limited to his own presuppositions, which differ considerably from Homer's.

One is frankly now left to question whether or not a fuller understanding of Homer's original context for *thymos* and its potential damage could provide an account for survivor distress which is not addressed in either psychiatry *or* the moral injury paradigm. Although the length, scope, and focus of this article is not sufficient to contain an attempt to accomplish such an ambitious feat, it may be helpful at least to present—as promised earlier—an examination of *thymos* in the Homeric literature in a summary manner, according to my own reading of the texts in the original language.

A Contextual View of Homeric Thymos

Although it is almost certain that the concept of *thymos* was in regular usage in ancient Greece before the time of Homer, its earliest place in surviving manuscripts can be found in Homer's *Iliad*. In both

Iliad and *Odyssey*, *thymos* represents an essential human capacity that is necessary for relationships. In Homer's work *thymos* represents (1) the seat of human emotion, (2) the source of instinctive action, and (3) the locus of moral intuition. Each of these essential categories of human functioning can be understood individually, in some way, but there is also in each a collective aspect, which transcends individual experience, and exists essentially within shared community life. By examining each of these three categories of *thymic* function in the writing of Homer, and by understanding their individual and collective elements, a general sense of the place of *thymos* in Homer's philosophical anthropology will become clear.

First, and most prominently, Homer uses *thymos* as the philosophical seat of human emotion. It is from this place of *thymos* that human beings are able to experience their vast array of moods, temperaments, and both pleasant and painful emotional reactions. Thaddeus Kobierzycki considers this function of *thymos* to be generally comparable to the functioning of "the heart" in other philosophical anthropologies, as it represents the place where suffering is experienced, and also the place where "liking, friendship, sensual love" and "feelings of hope" are stored, along with "pity, astonishment" and "courage."[23] Accordingly, *thymos* is also the locus from which humans can be driven to destroy relationships or alienate themselves from community during extreme emotional experiences of bitterness and rage. Bruno Snell notes that while Homer's use of *thymos* is sometimes "the abode of… love [and] sympathy," it is at other times the abode of powerful experiences of hatred that lead to murderous impulses or self-imposed exile.[24] This category of *thymic* functioning is distinct from reason or logic, although it ideally functions in synchronicity with reason. For instance, in Book 2 of *Iliad*, Homer's character Menelaus is said to have *thymic* understanding of Agamemnon's motives in preparing for war, and he is so moved by this understanding that he prepares to fight alongside of Agamemnon, though the prospects for victory are slim. This vignette demonstrates

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[23] Thaddeus Kobierzycki, "The Place and Role of Feelings in Homer's Description of the Corporeal and Non-Corporeal Soul," *Polish-English Quarterly* 4 (2010): 3-17.

[24] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications), 13.

Homer's understanding of how an emotional connection can take place between persons in which one shares the emotional state of another and becomes willing to act in response to that sharing. This is an important demonstration of Homer's understanding of the emotional capacity of *thymos*, as it contains aspects of both individual and interpersonal or social functioning.

Homer also writes about the potential for the actual development of communal *thymos*, comprising the emotional connection of an entire team or community, and usually aimed at a specific task essential to the well-being of all. For instance, in Book 13 of *Iliad*, a warrior named Idomeneus is about to face Aeneas in battle, and calls out to a number of his comrades to stand with him and fight. They respond to his call, and Homer describes them taking a stand together with one *thymos* in their chests. This sharing of *thymos* seems to account for the sense of community solidarity experienced when a number of persons share both an emotional state and a corporately understood urgency for action. There is also the possibility that once gained, shared *thymos* may be lost, as persons in community suffer disillusionment or defeat, or face some other adversity that leaves them isolated and alienated.

Secondly, Homer uses *thymos* to represent instinctive motivation to action in the human experience. Once a human being fixes on a particular objective, *thymos* can summon the motivation to act, and can also provide extra-rational instinctive direction to the human being in motion. This function is not purely disconnected from emotional functioning, since in the Homeric corpus emotion is usually present in any activity, but Homer certainly writes as if human emotion and instinctive motivation to action reside distinctly in *thymos*, each having a different purpose. Stephen Muse, a scholar and philosopher very familiar with the ancient Greek corpus, writes about this type of instinctive and aggressive function of *thymos* under the label of "proprioception," in which the inner sensations of the body connect with past physical experience in response to external stimuli without any analytical element, and move the body into appropriate action.[25] Both Snell and Kobierzycki comment at length on the association between *thymos* and instinctive

[25] Stephen Muse, *When Hearts Become Flame* (Rollinsford, NH: The Orthodox Research Institute, 2011), 120.

motivation to action in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Snell calls *thymos* Homer's "generator of motion," and "that which rouses a man to action" in his combat narratives.[26] He also notes Homer's use of *thymos* as an animal capacity on some occasions, as if Homer considered the aggressive instincts of *thymos* in the heat of battle to be a "force of energy" shared by humans and animals.[27] This does provide some insight into the kind of beast-like aggression and unrestrained violence that develops in the character of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*.

Kobierzycki describes the instinctual, aggressive aspect of *thymos* as being for Homer both "the seat of wrath" in the human person, capable of beast-like rage, and also the "repository of courage" that can aid a person in using principled restraint when using force for the sake of what he believes is right and just.[28] In Homer's usage, this martial or aggressive function can be either principled or unprincipled. That is, it can be restrained by a person's sense of what is right and good, leading to courageous action, or unrestrained by a person's sense of right and good, leading to beast-like violence capable of great inhumanity. Shirley Sullivan's work suggests that, for Homer, the difference between the two potentialities is in the connection forged between *thymos* and reason.[29] In her view, Homer seems to understand *thymos* and reason to ideally work together in decision-making as the relationship between intuition and logic, or the relationship between felt experience and linear analysis; in the case of broken harmony between the two, *thymos* can be either "bridled" by reason or overrun by it in any given situation.[30]

It may be helpful here to provide two illustrations of Sullivan's point, which are quite important in understanding the function of thymos in Homer's work. First, in Book 5 of *Iliad*, Homer's character Odysseus experiences a dilemma in the midst of combat, consulting both *thymos* and reason to decide on a course of action. This is not essentially a moral dilemma, but rather a tactical one, and Odysseus is using both his knowledge of warfare and his *thymic* intuition toward aggressive action to help him. Once his reason and *thymos* agree on an action, his *thymos* moves

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[26] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 9 and 13.
[27] Ibid., 11.
[28] Ibid., 6-7.
[29] Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer*, 84-85.
[30] Ibid., 85.

him into combat. This is an example of harmony between reason and *thymos*, leading to a good outcome. In contrast, in Book 22 of *Odyssey,* Homer describes a character named Phemius who believes his life to be in danger and who experiences a division between *thymos* and reason in examining his options for survival. Specifically, Phemius struggles to decide whether to offer a sacrifice to the gods, which seems the conventional thing to do, or to trust an intuitive urge to rush to Odysseus to beg for his mercy, even though in doing so he will very likely be killed. Phemius decides to trust his intuition, and his life is spared. This is an example in Homer's writing of a break between the harmony between reason and *thymos.* In this particular example, *thymic* intuition triumphs over rational analysis after an internal conflict, and there is a positive outcome. In other places in Homer's writing, *thymic* intuition triumphs over rational analysis with disastrous consequences, and in other places still, reason challenges *thymos* and restrains *thymic* intuition. This interplay between reason and *thymos* is an essential part of Homer's anthropological understanding of the human experience in general.

The third aspect of Homer's anthropological use of *thymos* is as an extra-rational capacity for intuiting what is good and right, and in Homer's writing it is often coupled with the *thymic* functioning of instinctive motivation. More specifically, in almost every place where a person is *thymically* intuiting right action, he or she is also motivated to follow what he or she intuits to be right. Understood together, and when functioning optimally, this aspect of *thymos* can be summarized as the ability of a human person to intuit what is good and then to immediately summon energy to act on behalf of the good. Sullivan again notices an ideal harmony between reason and *thymos* in this aspect of *thymic* functioning. Specifically, she implies that in Homer's usage, *thymos* can (1) ally with reason to pursue the good, (2) struggle against reason to pursue the good, when reason has been compromised, or, tragically, (3) struggle against reason to pursue something other than good, when *thymos* has been compromised (Sullivan, 1988). In this sense, *thymos* can be considered as the human conscience in Homer's work.

In Book 1, paragraph 225 of *Odyssey,* the goddess Athena speaks to Telemachus at a wedding feast at his house, questioning the occurrence there of what she considers to be wanton and shameless behavior. She also questions the state of Telemachus' *thymos* in being able to let these things occur around him without seeing their depravity and putting

a stop to them. Her challenge seems to be on both fronts: can Telemachus not, by *thymos*, intuit the wrong in these events, and having intuited the wrongs, could he not by *thymos* be roused to demand a change? Telemachus responds with an excuse, arguing that the unjust and unfortunate things that have happened to the people of his house—including the politically forced wedding occurring at the moment of her challenge—have left him in a position of moral lassitude. In this example, it seems that Homer's character Telemachus has allowed a kind of philosophical fatalism to overcome his *thymic* intuition and *thymic* call to action against injustice. This also captures the practical interplay between reason and *thymos* in Homer's worldview, and the way in which either capacity, when not operating in harmony with the other, can subjugate the other—to either positive or negative consequences.

Snell, noting Homer's understanding of the moral dimension of *thymos*, describes it as a kind of moral will, and also mentions that a general pattern of the interplay between reason and *thymos* in a particular individual could be considered that individual's particular "character."[31] Shay speaks at length of the "undoing of character" after injury to *thymos* in combat, and uses the character of Achilles to suggest many consequences to this condition, but does not choose to use Homer's own philosophical presuppositions to describe the process of such a thing.[32] Understanding the philosophical relationship between human reason and *thymos* in moral functioning, and considering the potential damage done to a person's morality when this relationship is distressed, may very well offer fresh insight into how Homer saw injury to *thymos* affecting human persons in general.

Summarizing the areas of function discussed above, Homeric *thymos* is a human capacity which contains the emotions, and which ensures emotional connection between a human being and his or her social environment and allows a human being to respond to the perceived needs of others. *Thymos* also functions in instinctive motivation to action or aggression, motivating the person to appropriate physical action in response to stimuli in his or her environment. When aligned with moral intuition, this motivation can include courageous action, and

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[31] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 14.
[32] Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 29.

when misaligned with moral intuition, this motivation can include inhumane brutality. Notably, Homeric *thymos* also serves as the center of human moral intuition, containing the ability to discern what is good, and oriented to this sense of goodness both through social connection and possibly, for Homer, through a connection with divine understandings of right and wrong.

Lost Functioning of Thymos in the Homeric Corpus

There are a number of examples of the loss of *thymic* functioning in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In fact, by my count, more than 100 such occurrences in Homer's work. Homer's understanding of damage to the emotional function of *thymos* centers on the potential for a person in extreme adversity to become both socially isolated and emotionally overwhelmed. This potential becomes far more likely if a person's social isolation has been forced. Homer writes as if a person in such circumstances may suffer a *thymic* injury that culminates in both the dissolution of his or her ability to maintain long-term relationships and chronic difficulty with regulating emotion in the future. Snell notes that, in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *thymos* can be "eaten away or torn asunder by pain" in "intense, sharp or heavy" fashion.[33] The pain that Snell mentions is profound emotional pain, brought on by extreme distress after such adversity as the loss of a beloved comrade or betrayal by a close friend or leader. In Book 6 of *Iliad*, Hector confronts Alexander for storing up bitterness and rage in his *thymos*, after being the cause of war for his countrymen. The object of Hector's rebuke is not that Alexander has simply felt bitterness or wrath, but that he is holding on to it, or allowing it to overtake him, and that it is causing him to abandon his subordinate warriors in their time of need. In response to Hector, Alexander reveals the complexity of his *thymic* disorientation, explaining that it has not been bitterness but despair that he has been nursing in his *thymos*, and that this is what paralyzed him in the midst of battle. As Alexander realizes that the battle does not go well for him and for his countrymen, and knowing that he is the cause of the battle in some way, he is overwhelmed emotionally, isolates himself from his fellow warriors, and begins to fall into despair.

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[33] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 18.

It is clear that damage to the emotional function of *thymos* has social elements. For instance, Alexander loses heart when he considers the impact of his actions on his comrades, and isolating himself from them, begins to despair. However, it is also implicit in the vignette of Alexander and Hector that damage to the emotional function of *thymos* includes a disharmony with reason. When Hector challenges Alexander, he uses a reasoned argument to do so, urging Alexander to rouse himself and to consider the people dying around the city. Responding to the challenge, Alexander is moved to action, suggesting that his capacity for reason has become aligned with his *thymos.* This vignette illustrates the potential for damage to *thymos* in human persons in the Homeric corpus, especially in situations associated with armed combat. In *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, when warriors experience a powerful emotional loss in combat, Homer describes a kind of emotional injury that follows in the place of *thymos*, in which social isolation, fear, paralysis of action, hunger for revenge, and loss of commitment to other people related to mistrust of oneself and others become the common features.

Homer also understands the potential for damage to the instinctive, action-oriented functioning of *thymos.* In such cases, the aggressive instincts of the human person become disoriented, and are either (1) over-regulated, leaving the person with a feeling of "deadness" or extreme lethargy, or else (2) under-regulated, leaving the person with wild, uncontrollable impulses to action. Both Kobierzycki and Snell notice these particular difficulties in *thymic* instinctual-impulse regulation following extreme adversity. Kobierzycki's work suggests that in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a person's ability to move into action can be lost upon what Homer describes as the departure of *thymos*, after which follows a sensation of deadness and loss of passion or vitality.[34] To illustrate this, in Book 22 of *Iliad*, Homer includes a petition from Hector's elderly father to his son in which the old man speaks of *thymos* as the life force in his limbs, which can be stolen away. For Homer, after *thymos* departs, a sense of vitality departs with it, and a person can experience the sense that there is no life left in them, or a kind of living death.

Snell notices the other potential outcome when the instinctive, ac-

[34] Kobierzycki, "The place and role of feelings in Homer's description of the corporeal and non-corporeal soul," 3.

tion-oriented aspects of *thymos* become disoriented during extreme adversity, noticing that this can cause a person to become unbridled by reason, and unable to control himself or herself.[35] He notes that, "when running wild" like this, an under-regulated *thymos* can lead a person to "beast-like" functioning, demonstrating brutal and compassionless behavior.[36] The final state of Achilles leading up to his death in *Iliad* seems to illustrate Snell's observations, as Achilles has essentially become a brute, dishonoring his enemies and engaging in shocking and dishonorable conduct in battle.

In one particular place in *Iliad*, in which Andromache has fainted at the sight of Hector's body being dragged around the city, she has to—in Homer's words—re-concentrate or re-center her *thymos* into her chest. Although it is not concretely clear, it could be surmised that, in Homer's philosophical worldview, it is possible during extreme adversity for *thymos* to be unseated in some way, becoming metaphorically dislocated, and no longer functioning in its proper place. During this dislocation of her *thymos*, Andromache demonstrates a subsequent difficulty in feeling alive and present in her circumstances. Although Homer does not specifically use this idea of *thymic* dislocation in his narratives of warriors experiencing under-regulation of impulses to action, the metaphor is helpful in those narratives also, in that it seems as if those warriors do not have the ability to *thymically* interact with reason in order to restrain them from inhumanity. It is as if metaphorically, in those cases, their *thymos* is no longer located in the correct place.

Homer's concept of *thymos* and the potential impact of its loss of function with regard to the use and regulation of instinctual aggression in the human person does seem to conceptually account for both a conscious disconnect from emotion and bodily sensation and the onset of a chronic, lustful rage. Under extreme adversity, the damage to or the disorientation of this aspect of *thymic* functioning can have lasting consequences, as demonstrated clearly by Homer's characters. One final and unusual example of Homer's use of *thymos* as the seat of instinctive motivation is a universal one. On rare occasions Homer uses *thymos* to describe a kind universal vitality common among all human beings that

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[35] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 13.
[36] Ibid., 13.

goes beyond instinct or motivation to action, and represents a kind of life force common to all people. This life force is extinguished after death, but can also be in some way lost while a person still lives. A brief vignette from Book 23 of *Iliad* provides a helpful illustration of Homer's use of *thymos* in this way. Odysseus has returned from the war and is speaking with his elderly mother, and he describes the process of death as one in which a disease may take *thymos* from the body of an ailing person. In the following sentence he describes how through longing for his mother and her compassion during his time away in combat he had also lost *thymos*, and with it a sense of the goodness of life. There are at least three notable aspects of this short passage.

First, there is the use of *thymos* as a kind of life force common to all human persons that is extinguished at the time of death. Homer uses *thymos* this way on a number of occasions, especially during death narratives, such as those found in Books 10 and 19 of *Odyssey*. Secondly, there is the use of *thymos* as a person's experience of inner vitality when living in a community, which may be lost while a person is still alive—especially if they have been alienated from their community. As Odysseus is describing his experiences to his mother, he is expressing to her his sense that, although he is still alive physically, he feels that there is a part of him that has died while he was away from home in combat. In Homer's writing, then, death is not the only experience that can rob a person of *thymos*; experiences in war are also capable of taking away *thymos*, through a disconnect with homeland and family. Third, there is a sense of the goodness of life that is missing upon Odysseus' return. Chapman translates Odysseus saying to his mother in this passage in Book 23 of *Iliad* that he lost the "honey-sweetness of life" while away at war.[37]

These three aspects or potentialities for the loss of *thymos* as representative of an inner vitality among humans may apply to an individual warrior, but the individual warrior clearly experiences them in relationship to their families, their comrades, and their fellow human beings in the Homeric corpus. The collective vitality enabled by *thymos* can be disrupted at the point of death, and can also be disrupted in the aftermath of an extreme adversity that leaves a person isolated and alienated from

[37] Homer, *Iliad and Osyssey,* trans. G. Chapman (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 2000).

his or her home and community.

In certain cases, Homer's characters experience a moral disorientation of *thymos*. In such cases, those characters have experienced a disconnect between moral reasoning and the moral intuition of *thymos* in the midst of extreme adversity, and are no longer able to harmoniously understand or intuit what is good or right, leading to a breakdown in moral functioning. Snell demonstrates an understanding of this phenomenon, as informed by various vengeance narratives in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[38] According to Snell, in Homer's vengeance narratives a warrior, having lost a comrade or loved one, can be *thymically* driven to seek revenge as a type of justice, even when reason tells him that such an act is not or cannot be justified.[39] If the warrior silences his moral reasoning and follows his *thymic* drive for justice anyway, he may commit an atrocity in the name of vengeance, in which his aggression is unbridled and he is unable to intuit the need for humane restraint in the passion of violent action.

Jonathan Shay actually gives a very helpful albeit undeveloped example of such a vengeance narrative in *Iliad* that includes Homer's character Achilles.[40] He quotes a scene from Book 9 of *Iliad* in which Achilles demands that other Greek officers help him cause pain to Agamemnon for reasons of pure vengeance. In this scene, Shay notes that Achilles, who sustained damage to the moral functioning of *thymos* after being betrayed by his trusted leader, is attempting to rally fellow leaders to break their own oaths of honor to help him pursue vengeance.[41] It is, in Shay's view, the beginning of the dissolution of Achilles' ability to know and do what is right:

> Before the [moral] injuries recorded in the *Iliad*, Achilles' habit was to respect enemy dead rather than defile them, and to ransom enemy prisoners rather than kill them. Achilles loses his humanity in two stages: he ceases to care about his fellow Greeks after betrayal by his commander, and then he loses all compassion for any human being after the death of Patroklos. The *Iliad* is the story of the undoing of Achilles' [morality].[42]

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[38] Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, 9-13.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, 25.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

This understanding of Achilles' moral disorientation as a warrior is an important one. Through a *thymic* drive for vengeance, both in response to betrayal and in response to the loss of a comrade, Achilles is intuitively moved into action to combat injustice, but without the restraint of his moral reasoning. As a result, he loses his ability to use intuition and reason to harmoniously discern what is right, and also loses the ability to restrain himself in violent action.

Earlier in this piece, Sullivan was credited with noticing that in Homer's usage, the moral aspect of *thymos* can (1) ally with reason to pursue the good, (2) struggle against reason to pursue the good, when reason has been compromised, or, tragically, (3) struggle against reason to pursue something other than good, when *thymic* morality has been compromised. The situation with Achilles, as mentioned above, is Homer's most detailed example of the third of Sullivan's potentialities. In the aftermath of an aggressive, unprincipled *thymic* pursuit of something other than good, Achilles find himself more and more morally disoriented, and by the time of his death, his moral economy has become completely inverted from the moral economy of his fellow warriors and his society in general. Specifically, he no longer has any meaningful relationship with the ideals of honor, courage, humanity, compassion, brotherhood, or love.

There is one further sense of extreme moral disorientation that has not yet been mentioned in this article. Sullivan suggests that there may be spiritual overtones to Homer's idea of shared *thymos*, in its moral functioning.[43] She notes that in ancient Greek metaphysical philosophy, *thymos* seems capable of being "open to divine influence," in the sense of a person's inner moral intuition being guided by divine values, and that this capability might function both individually and communally.[44] This sense of *thymic* morality as a divinely informed function in human beings is certainly present in the work of Plato, writing centuries after Homer, and many Greek thinkers following Plato. It is not as evident in the writing of Homer, who makes use of divine entities as mostly minor, anthropomorphic characters in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Nevertheless, one unusual passage in *Odyssey* may be worth mentioning, on this topic. In

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[43] Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer*, 117.
[44] Ibid.

Book 21 of *Odyssey*, Odysseus engages in some verbal sparring with Antinous. At one point in the dialogue, Antinous references the mythological story of Eurytion and Peirithous, and noted how Eurytion made his *thymos* senseless and insane after drinking too much wine, and proceeded to become a worker of evil in Peirithous' house—specifically by sexually assaulting Peirithous' daughter. It is the only time in the *Odyssey* in which the term *thymos* is directly connected with a Greek term whose plain sense in common translation can be rendered equivalent to the English word "evil." Even in this case, Homer's understanding of Eurytion's inner condition in the mythological text is one that evidences a relatively indirect connection between *thymos* and evil. Homer writes as if in certain circumstances, such as drunkenness, *thymic* morality can lose its essential connection with reason, and therefore become more likely to give in to impulses that are—in Homer's worldview—intrinsically aligned with a universally understood evil, such as nonconsensual sex with a youngster, in the case of Eurytion. Homer does not go on to discuss Eurytion's inner state after this series of events, so further insight into his understanding of the consequences of this engagement with evil cannot be deduced.

For Further Investigation

A summary of *thymic* disorientation in Homer's work—resulting from a hopefully more careful position of contextual observation—may be offered as follows. In addressing potential damage to the emotional function of *thymos*, Homer demonstrated a psychological understanding of how an adversity survivor may sustain radical damage to his or her ability to remain socially connected with community and to retain emotional stamina in relationships following exposure to adversity. In addressing potential damage to the *thymic* function of instinctive motivation to action, Homer demonstrated a psychological understanding of how survivors may experience a deregulation of their aggressive instincts, in extreme cases leaving them feeling either uncontrollable in their passion or else entirely without felt vitality. Lastly, in addressing potential damage to the *thymic* function of moral intuition, Homer demonstrated a philosophical understanding of how survivors may experience a disconnect between moral reasoning and moral intuition, leaving them unable to harmoniously understand or intuit what is good or right, and leading to a breakdown in moral functioning.

This interplay between moral, emotional, and motivational aspects of human persons in distress *within a single anthropological locus* is quite unique to ancient Greek world outlook—first evident in Homer but later also evident in the writings of the Golden Age of Greek philosophy, including the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates. In my experience, no serious discussion of the cross-contextual and cross-cultural applicability of the ancient Greek concept of *thymic* health or corresponding discussions of such strange-sounding sub-concepts as *thymic* illness, *thymic* nosology, *thymic* hygiene, and *thymic* therapy exist in the literature. They do not exist in the psychiatric and psychological literature, and they do not exist in the philosophical literature. *Thymos* is in fact completely absent from contemporary public discourses, despite its clear potential for influencing a wide number of contemporary discourses, if handled with proper epistemological discipline. With the rise of an alarming physical reductivism in the social and medical sciences today, in which philosophy continues to lose its impact as an essential way of "knowing" in order to make room for ever-greater dependence on neuroscientific theorizing, any lost opportunity to exploit an existing opening for philosophical contribution in this arena is a heavy loss indeed. Given the fairly unique and still-existing opening for the moral injury discourse to impact contemporary psychiatric veteran care, and given the important-if-underdeveloped place of *thymos* in Shay's original paradigm, this article may serve as a call for further development, while the opportunity still exists.