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THE HIDDEN GOD. ACHILLES, AQUINAS, AND MORAL ACTION IN AN ORDERED WORLD

The Problem of Seeing

On each return to the Iliad one marvels more at the Achilles of Book Nine, seated in his camp near the Achaian ships, soothing his heart by the lyre's backward-turned attunement. His heart burns, not so much against Hektor, eager to set fire to the Greek barks, as at Agamemnon and his unjust seizure of Briseis. Nonetheless he is comforted by the lyric tales of heroes gone before. Indeed, Achilles here presents us with an image of philosophical activity. Confronted with death, as all men are, Achilles must weigh whether it is better to abandon the beached ships, live a long and prosperous life, and die comfortably, or to die in the intensity of battle and become himself the subject of song. Where, that is, does happiness lie in a life bound by death?

Surveying the body of Homer's work, in fact, it becomes clear why the Greek philosophers, particularly Plato and Aristotle, turned so often to the poet for validation. Homer, it would seem, contains the cosmos, from the gods to the grain to the character of the soul. Much of the task before Plato and Aristotle was to explicate the philosophy bound in Homer's poetry.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in turn, aided by the passage of fifteen hundred years and the revelation of the New Covenant, draws the strengths of Plato and Aristotle under the lens of his own most incisive intellect and crafts a philosophy staggering in its scope and elegance. Thus by one of its typically mystifying turns the Western tradition brings into conversation the blind poet and the Dominican priest.

The rich echoes of this conversation, though, go largely unheard, and when heard, largely ignored. Rarely has there been a period more propitious to the philosopher or the poet, and it is perhaps a function of this fact that philosophy and poetry go mostly derided. Homer is myth. Aquinas, worse still, is theology. Plato and Aristotle, even without the burdens of arcane theories of form and antique cosmologies, admit of little practical application. Perhaps the most univocal reproach which might be leveled against our classic thinkers is that their understandings of the universe are too baroque.¹ Most people, content with or confined to life on the sensory level, do not notice the invisible elements of the cosmos or the complexity of human activity, so the Homeric and Thomistic analyses thereof appear improbable.

All told, though, it is Aquinas who seems to suffer the worst neglect in contemporary thought. His theological affiliations earn him calumny with many philosophers, and the density of his work renders him obscure to a general populace unused to study. Plato and Aristotle benefit from a kind of romantic antiquity, and it is precisely as myth-maker that Homer enjoys a comparative flourishing in a contemporary society which, even as it rejects myth as unscientific and impractical, obsesses over superheroes and vampires.

Our purpose here will be chiefly to consider two common elements in the works of Homer and St. Thomas—a hierarchically conceived universe and its reflection in a hierarchically structured soul. We

¹ Cf. Ralph McInerny, "Introduction" [to "What Makes Actions Good or Bad"], in Thomas Aquinas, *Selected Writings*, ed. Ralph McInerny (London: Penguin, 1998), 565.

will begin by sketching St. Thomas's understanding of the cosmos and the soul's proper activity therein; we shall then apply this sketch to Homer's account of the anger of Achilles. Such an approach ought to issue in two chief benefits: first, a better understanding of the Iliad, which, after all, sings chiefly the anger of Achilles; second, a vindication of St. Thomas's thought by demonstration of the explicative power of his philosophy. If, that is, Homer, as poet par excellence, can be trusted as an insightful psychologist, and if St. Thomas's psychology can be shown to map onto and clarify Homer's treatment of the soul, greater credence would seem due to St. Thomas's thought.

Aquinas: Cosmos, Virtual Quantity, Faculty Psychology

We shall examine three elements in St. Thomas's teaching: the cosmos and its hierarchy, the notion of virtual quantity, and the structure of the soul. The first and last of these mirror each other. The soul, in a sense, is the cosmos in miniature. The idea of virtual quantity shall aid as a point of unification throughout. It may seem that our initial consideration of the cosmos is unduly long, yet it must be sufficiently sketched for us to grasp the import of virtual quantity, which in turn will prove crucial for understanding the psychology of moral acts; it shall, moreover, provide us with a necessary framework for examining Homer's cosmos.

The universe, St. Thomas asserts, consists of a hierarchy of beings. At the top of this kind of cosmic chain of command we have God, being itself (*esse tantum*).² God is thus, to borrow eucharistic language, the source and summit of all things, and St. Thomas's philosophy is unified by this teaching. While all other beings are separate in terms of essence and existence, God's essence and existence are one.³ All possible perfections, or ways of having being, are thus unified in God.

² Thomas Aquinas, *On Being and Essence*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto, Ontario: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1968), 55–56.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

The rest of the universe is in turn created by God's free act, and it is hierarchically arranged according to shares in the perfection that is God's. God, in sharing his perfections, can only do so in limited ways. Thus the universe resembles, in a sense, a massive genus, directed at all levels to God as its end but divided among those levels by the contrary opposition among beings who more and less perfectly participate in divine perfection.

Lying just below God in intensity of being are the angels or separated substances. Like God, they are immaterial intellectual beings. They are not, however, completely simple, though their composition is not one of form and spiritual matter, which latter term many of Thomas's contemporaries adopted and which Thomas saw as a contradiction.⁴ At the very least their composition would seem to be one of essence and existence.

The angels themselves are distributed in a hierarchy, ranging from those closest to God down to those next in perfection to human beings. We thus see an aesthetic necessity to the existence of angels. Without them, there would be an obvious gap in the order of being between the immaterial-material composition of humanity and the complete simplicity of God.⁵

There are below the angels the heavenly spheres, more or less incorruptible material substances which by their movement display something of the order of the mind of God and in turn exert an influence over all things in the sublunar realm. These spheres even affect human beings, though not by direct action upon the mind. Nonetheless, as they affect the physical realm and the mind takes its material for reasoning from the senses, they exert an indirect influence on thought and will.⁶ The division of sublunar and supralunar realms has, of course, been

⁴ Armand Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Random House, 1982), 177–178.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁶ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 9, 5, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007) (hereafter as: *ST*).

largely voided by modern scientific inquiry. Nonetheless, the essential point holds that the heavens demonstrate order and influence human activity.

Below the angels in order of spiritual being are humans. Like God and the separated substances, humans are intellectual beings. Humans are also, however, material beings. Their composition is one of form and matter. It is form which indicates the specific difference of humans as opposed to other animals, and it is matter which individuates human beings.⁷ The fact that human beings are not completely differentiated on the species or formal level does not indicate that human beings do not differ in terms of formal excellence. That is, the fact that all humans are human does not mean they are equally excellent. Because humans all share one species, there exists among them a lesser degree of hierarchy than that among the angels. Nonetheless, we can discern different degrees of perfection among human beings similar to those we perceive among angels, in terms of their relation to the lower and higher parts of the cosmos. A negative example may provide the easiest means of access to this concept.

Purely material beings fall below man on the chain of being. As humans exist in the body, though, and move among material things and are primarily aware of sense objects, it can be all too easy to develop a disordered disposition toward matter. Thus Aquinas, following Aristotle, places tremendous emphasis on moral training in pleasures of touch.⁸ Intemperance in food, drink, and sex leads to a disordered body. A body weighed down by food and a brain clouded by wine disrupt our attention to the higher orders of being. Human perfection (here taken in the sense of completeness for the sake of natural action) thus depends in no small part on the appropriate ordering of body and soul. People in

⁷ Maurer, *Medieval Philosophy: An Introduction*, 178.

⁸ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P. (Notre Dame, IN: Dumb Ox Books, 1993) (hereafter as: *Commentary on NE*).

possession of properly ordered faculties are best suited to serve as ordering principles for others less attuned to their proper formal objects.

Below man on the scale of being are the animals, differentiated according to sense faculties; plants, differentiated by nutritive powers; and the various elements. Though none of these possess reason as an internal principle of voluntary activity, they are nonetheless all directed to God through the forms they possess, which cause them to behave in characteristic ways.⁹

Every level of this hierarchy, it must be remembered, consists in a degree of perfection, in a degree of having being, a share in the act of existence. At each level, the members are providentially directed to those above and those below. God, of course, can look no higher than himself, but his creative attention is at all moments directed to all parts of the created order. The angels look up to God and in their vision of God perform works which direct the lower beings, both angelic and human, toward richer participation in God's being. Human beings gaze upward, both to the separated substances and to God, and they also cultivate the material order, as commanded to do in Genesis. Matter cannot look lower than itself; it is, nonetheless, moved toward participation in God by his direction through natural instinct.

We will see a loose embryonic version of such a rich cosmology in Homer's poetry; for now, though, having a sketch of this scheme in place, let us examine the notion of virtual quantity. It will add to our understanding of the cosmos by clarifying the means God uses to distribute being to the various orders of perfection and clear the way for a better vision of facultative moral psychology.

Virtual quantity, in St. Thomas's philosophy, is a way of understanding form. The term may offer some difficulty for contemporary understanding because of the present associations born by each of the terms. Virtual reality, for instance, is not real, which therefore casts a veil over the word virtual. It tends to connote weakness rather than

⁹ *ST*-I, 78, 4.

strength. It may thus prove helpful to approach virtual quantity by way of contrast with dimensive quantity.

Quantity is most commonly associated with physical dimensions. We speak of quantities of food, building materials, etc. We also, however, speak of quantities of things which plainly do not admit of physical dimensions. A man may be said to possess great quantities of courage, for instance, but courage has no volume or weight. Is this merely a kind of equivocation, or does it point to a metaphysical insight?

We might also notice that dimensive quantities are not sufficient to account for the existence of beings. A marble statue of a man, though it should have the precise physical dimensions of a man, is not a man. No statue from the hand of Phidias, however perfectly proportioned to the ideal of a human being, has sprung to life. Even Frankenstein's monster, composed of the kind of matter substantive of human beings in dimensions roughly similar to human ones, was not a human being. There must, then, be something apart from dimensive quantity which distinguishes beings causally.

For such a concept St. Thomas turns to virtual quantity, an intensive measure which distinguishes things according to species and according to excellence within species. As O'Rourke maintains, St. Thomas uses this notion of virtual or intensive quantity "to convey the inward nature of things and the varying degrees of their perfection."¹⁰ Virtual quantity measures not a thing's physical dimensions but rather its intensity of being. This sheds light on St. Thomas's picture of the hierarchy of being. Gazing on the world around us, we might feel an impulse to classify beings on the basis of physical size. Looking at the cow, the whale, the mountain, and the sea, we might start to think of them as greater beings than we; indeed, all of the aforementioned have at one time or another been divinized. St. Thomas recognizes, though, that dimensive quantity is not a sufficient measure of excellence. Ra-

¹⁰ Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 157.

ther, he looks to virtual quantity, observing that spiritual intensity grows as we look up through the elements to man to the angels to God.

Within the relatively modest proportions of the human frame we thus see a tremendous intension. The soul, according to Aristotle and St. Thomas, is the form of the human being, the organizing principle which causes and harmonizes all those faculties necessary for performing contemplative actions in a material context. We thus see that the kind of virtual quantity possessed by human beings results in a hierarchy of faculties that attunes man to the rest of the universe and that it is the proper utilization and harmonization of these faculties that results in fitting human action and thus in human happiness. Let us turn now to an examination of those faculties, along with their attendant functions.

Aquinas approaches human faculties via three kinds of souls and certain modes appropriate to those souls.¹¹ The vegetative soul corresponds to the nutrition and augmentation principles we see in plants. By these powers the human body attains the kind of dimensive quantities appropriate to human life. The sensitive soul corresponds to the principle by which animals move about, defend themselves, and reproduce. Human beings have sense faculties which allow us to maintain and propagate individual and species life as well as to gain material to be worked upon by the intellectual soul. The intellect, looking to the truth, provides principles for thought and action whereby harmony arises among all of man's faculties.

Operating within the sensitive and intellectual souls are the appetites, which, by putting man in touch with the external world under the guidance of reason, form the arena of moral action. St. Thomas treats first of the sense appetites: concupiscible and irascible. The concupiscible appetite concerns itself with pleasures and pains assessed through the external senses.¹² It chiefly looks to the pleasures of touch—food, drink, and sex—whereby individual and species life are maintained.

¹¹ *ST I-I*, 77ff.

¹² *Ibid.*, 81, 2.

This is thus the seat of the virtue of temperance, whereby reason orders our pursuit of sense pleasures. It is also the locus of six emotions which put us in touch with those pleasures: love and hatred, desire and aversion, and pleasure and pain.

All animals, it seems, have some share in the concupiscible appetite. All are moved to seek pleasure and avoid pain in order to stay alive and propagate life in future generations. Human appetite begins to be set apart from that of other animals in the irascible appetite. As the name suggests, this is the seat of anger, as well as of hope and despair, fear and daring. The irascible appetite looks to real pleasures and pains insofar as they are difficult to attain or avoid.¹³ While the concupiscible and irascible appetites both concern pleasures and pains, the latter acts chiefly as a check on fear and despair, stirring up the courage necessary to attain the real good in spite of obstacles. The irascible appetite is thus the arena of fortitude. As the seat of anger, moreover, the irascible appetite will prove a particularly important part of our analysis of Achilles, as Aquinas notes that anger arises as a result of a perceived injustice.¹⁴

The concupiscible and irascible appetites, and especially the latter, are crucial for putting the soul in touch with reality. The person who hopes recognizes that real good exists and that it can be obtained. This recognition of what exists outside the soul proves necessary for moral action in allowing the agent to assess his own abilities against the requirements for attaining the good, thus resulting in prudential action.

In addition to the sense appetites, St. Thomas notes the existence of an intellectual appetite, the will, which desires the good apprehended intellectually.¹⁵ The will serves as a principle of moral action by initiating the movement of the person toward the good presented by the intellect. This initiation occurs through three acts of the will regarding ends:

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II-I, 47, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, I-I, 82.

volition, fruition, and intention; and five acts regarding means: counsel, choice, consent, command, and use.¹⁶ The properly formed will directs man through these eight acts to what is proportionate, as goodness for Aquinas is closely connected with proportion, with a thing having all those parts it needs in an appropriate measure for it to behave as its form requires. Justice, as the proper proportioning of equality among people, thus resides in the will.

The appetites, for Aquinas, serve as the means by which particular or cogitative reason comes into play.¹⁷ The intellect tends to deal with universals; particular reason brings universals to bear on particular situations. By his intellectual capacity, man is able to perceive something of the eternal law by which God governs the universe.¹⁸ This participation in eternal law is known as natural law, and the chief principle in which it issues is that of synderesis: do good and avoid evil.¹⁹ The dictum makes no sense, though, in a vacuum. Practical reason takes moral reasoning out of that vacuum and applies it to specific situations.

We see this in Aquinas's assessment of the cardinal virtues. Virtue lies in the good deed done well. The good deed depends on the end, and virtues thus take their genera from temperance, fortitude, and justice. Temperance demands appropriate action concerning pleasures. Fortitude demands certain actions regarding the danger of death. Justice demands appropriate ordering of action toward equality with others. Temperance, courage, and justice (located, we have seen, in the three appetites) thus give us the deed to be done. Prudence, located in particular reason, tells us how these deeds are to be done by assessing the means appropriate to the end.²⁰ Moral reasoning is thus not purely syllogistic. We might take an example from the sphere of justice. Justice, generally speaking, demands an appropriate distribution of goods

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, II-I, 9–16.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, I-I, 81, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, I-I, 91, 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, I-I, 94, 2.

²⁰ *Commentary on NE*, 1289.

among people. If an acquaintance of mine lends me a gun, justice would in most cases demand that I return the gun when asked for it, thus maintaining the appropriate equality. It may be the case, however, that this acquaintance has become demented or depressed. In this case, prudence, or proper reasoning about things to be done, indicates that the just action is in fact not to return the gun.

Here we see again the importance of virtual quantity. Prudence, and thus all moral action, is concerned with the doable deed.²¹ In order to act prudently, the agent must assess his own powers, the intensity of his own being, against the fulness of being demanded by the necessary action. If one who cannot swim, for instance, witnesses someone falling overboard, the prudent and courageous action is not to attempt a rescue; this would simply double the risk to individual and species preservation.

In brief, we can formulate a fourfold analysis of moral action using St. Thomas's methods. We first find an action's genus by reference to temperance, fortitude, and justice. We find the action's species, good or bad, by looking to prudence. Prudence, in turn, depends on the eight acts of the will and the eight circumstances of an action. Such an analysis should prove comprehensive, as it demands the use of particular and not simply universal reasoning.

It may seem again that our summary of St. Thomas's moral psychology has grown bloated. This moral psychology, though, is essentially a study of harmony, both among the faculties and among persons, and an understanding of this harmony will prove critical to our study of Achilles. Anger is the initiating force behind Homer's epic, and a sense of anger depends on a sense of justice, and the performance of justice needs prudence. Prudence, moreover, depends on the ability to choose the real over the apparent good and the greater over the lesser good, and this is not possible without temperance in pleasures of touch and fortitude regarding dangers of death. The Greeks noted these virtues as nec-

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1169.

essary to the establishment of organizations—families, businesses, and states—which conduced to the creation of leisure needed for philosophy to exist. It must be remembered that St. Thomas's moral psychology is set against the background of this organizational psychology. An in-depth study here, then, will be justified by the fruit it bears in examining the soul of Achilles.

There is one further point we must consider before turning to Homer, one closely connected with virtue, namely friendship. Friendship, according to St. Thomas, demands that two people will and do the good for each other, that they live in community, and that they share a common understanding of the good.²² Such amity, as in that between Achilles and Patroklos, plays a key role in the fate of Ilium. Moreover, friendship depends on equality between persons, as only those who are more or less equal are capable of the kind of society on which friendship depends. St. Thomas, following Aristotle, thus points out that friendship is a kind of perfected justice. Since anger depends on a sense of justice, it stands to reason that friendship will also serve as a forum for anger, and we will see this in connection with the wrath of Achilles.²³

Aquinas thus presents us with a picture of an ordered universe arranged on a scale of perfection according to virtual quantity. Human beings, existing more or less in a middle position on this scale of being, must act in the context of a material world, and they are fitted with the faculties and powers necessary for such action as results in happy contemplation of the universe, which can only be achieved through appropriate external action. With these Thomistic tools in hand, let us turn to Achilles, attempting to draw fruit from an analysis of his anger and its bearing on his own happiness.

²² *Ibid.*, 1561.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1543.

The Anger of Achilles

Before approaching an analysis of Achilles' actions, we would do well to set forth the basic structure of the Homeric universe. Like Aquinas's cosmos, the Homeric world is hierarchically ordered, though the ordering here takes a much looser form. Indeed, certain tensions in the texts evidence the vagueness of Homer's own understanding of the universe his characters inhabit.

At first blush it seems that the Olympian gods constitute the chief power in Homer's cosmos. Among them there is a kind of hierarchy. Zeus, it quickly becomes apparent, is the god-in-chief. Not even an assault by all of the other gods can overstay the power of the Olympian leader.²⁴ Among these other deities, some are evidently more powerful than others. Athene appears mightier than Aphrodite, Apollo greater than Hephaestos. Hephaestos, incidentally, with his crippled frame, highlights a feature of the Homeric world curious to the philosopher; namely, Homer's gods are at least partly material beings. They have bodies capable of all the functions and susceptible of many of the harms common to human beings. They engage in conjugal relations with each other and with human beings. They feast together. Those who join battle with man even shed blood.²⁵ Homer's gods are thus, in essence, immortal human beings, similar in many respects to modern superheroes.

Many of these gods, it seems, are products of a pantheistic impulse proceeding from experience of the vast. Poseidon, for instance, springs from the sea, Apollo from the sun, Hephaestos out of flame. Here we see an association of dimensive and virtual quantity. Mighty physical forces come almost naturally, in the ancient world as well as in

²⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961), I. 580–581.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, V. 336ff.

contemporary brands of paganism, to be linked with greater intensity of being than that accorded to humans.

The gods, including Zeus, are further limited in that above them are certain forces to which they appear to be bound, forces such as the Fates and the Hours.²⁶ Here we see the starkest difference between the Homeric gods and St. Thomas's God. Homer's gods, though powerful, are parts of the created (or uncreated) universe, bound by the laws of that universe. Their causal power is extremely limited; they seem essentially to be highly autonomous efficient causes. St. Thomas's God, on the other hand, is the supreme cause of all, including time and all of the world's laws.

Below the gods, as suggested by their fruitful interactions with human beings, are various demigods, such as Achilles. They share in mortality (though some are apotheosized); nonetheless, their being is much more intensely concentrated than that of normal mortals. These are the chief heroes of the ancient world, men like Hercules, Achilles, and Aeneas.

Beneath the demigods, of course, come typical mortals. Homer invests even these, though, with an intensity of being beyond that we have come to expect from the normal man; he conveys this intensity especially by the intercession of the gods on behalf of certain men in battle, as when Patroklos dons the armor of Achilles. These men, moreover, inhabit a material world which breathes divine vapors, as in the deities associated with the various elements.

Homer, surveying this charged realm, begins his *Iliad* with the usual proemic invocation of the Muse: "Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus / and its devastation."²⁷ He proceeds to relate that the cause of this anger lies in a conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles. Both have grown angry as a result of perceived injustices regarding the distribution of the spoils of Thebe. We thus see from the

²⁶ *Ibid.*, XVI. 440ff.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I. 1–2.

Iliad's outset that Thomistic analysis of the passions affords insight into the poem's pivotal conflict.

Indeed, keeping St. Thomas in mind as we read Book One, we see that anger resulting from injustice causes not only the conflict among the Achaians but also the entire Trojan war. Agamemnon mustered the Greeks for the sake of retrieving Helen, stolen from Menelaos by Paris. This is marked an injustice for several reasons, not least of which is Paris' apparent effeminacy. The expedition thus aims, as Achilles pointedly reminds Agamemnon, "to win your honor and Menelaos'."²⁸

The kind of justice at stake here is that Aristotle and St. Thomas call distributive, which "consists in the distribution of certain common goods (either honor or money . . .) that are to be apportioned among people who share in social community."²⁹ Living in community necessarily involves sharing both goods and burdens such as money, honor, glory, and labor. According to Aquinas, these goods ought to be distributed according to a notion of geometric rather than arithmetic equality. That is, goods should be distributed in proportion to the excellence of each person. Here we see the notion of virtual quantity in play again. The more a person harmonizes his activity toward the performance of his proper end, the greater his spiritual power, and the more deserving he is of rewards and honors.

Looking more intently now through the lens of virtual quantity at the Achaian quarrel, we see the violation of distributive justice. Agamemnon, having led the Greeks against Thebe, was granted Chryseis, daughter of Chryses, priest of Apollo, in the division of spoils. The girl's beauty renders her a fitting portion for Agamemnon; as high king among the Greeks, he deserves the best of the spoils. Unfortunately for him, this gift is displeasing to Apollo, who as a god participates more intensely in being than even the highest human king. Thus the anger of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I. 159.

²⁹ *Commentary on NE*, 927.

Apollo, and thus the need for Agamemnon to return Chryseis to her father.

Agamemnon is not wrong, though, to point out that he as king merits a share in the spoils of Thebe: “Find me then some prize that shall be my own, lest I only / among the Argives go without.”³⁰ Agamemnon is not the largest nor the strongest nor even the most warlike among his people. Nonetheless, the office of king conveys a tremendous excellence upon him. In a sense, he bears the merit of all of his people. Nestor warns Achilles of this kingly strength: “Nor, son of Pel-eus, think to match your strength with / the king, since never equal with the rest is the portion of honour / of the sceptred king to whom Zeus gives magnificence.”³¹

Nestor also recognizes, though, that none can match the battle strength of Achilles, and that he, indeed, has proved the Greeks’ principle defense against Hektor’s attacks. Nestor, examining their conflict, calls Achilles “the stronger man” and urges Agamemnon to “give over . . . bitterness against Achilleus, he who / stands as a great bulwark of battle over all the Achaians.”³² Achilles is the strongest of the Greeks; he deserves his honor. So great is his anger at Agamemnon’s determination to seize Briseis that he even briefly considers killing Agamemnon. His decision-making process proves illustrative of St. Thomas’s account of inward moral action.

Achilles’ anger is the result of a real injustice, an inequality between him and Agamemnon. Through anger, the irascible appetite puts Achilles in touch with this real injustice. His anger must be assuaged by the reestablishment of justice; and hurt, Aquinas tells us, is the principle means by which anger seeks justice.³³ Justice gives us the end of moral action here, but prudence must give the appropriate means, and so we

³⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, I. 118–119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, I. 277–279.

³² *Ibid.*, I. 280, 282–283.

³³ *ST* II-I, 47, 2.

see Achilles casting about for a course of action: “the anger came on Peleus’ son, and within / his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering / whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword . . . and kill the son of Atreus, / or else . . . to check his anger.”³⁴

Prudence, we have said, depends on particular reason for the as-signation of proper means to a virtuous end, and thus forms a kind of nexus between the intellect and the appetites. To examine the prudence of Achilles’ action, then, we must turn to Aquinas’ five-part analysis of the action of the will regarding means, moving from counsel through choice, consent, and command to use. Homer fortunately externalizes the inner workings of Achilles’ will for our examination.

Deciding whether to draw his sword or not, Achilles takes counsel, both with himself and, Homer tells us, with Athene, who urges him not to draw his sword, but rather to abuse Agamemnon with words.³⁵ Achilles agrees with Athene’s advice, thus passing through choice, which Aristotle describes as a desire for what has been counseled, into consent, which closes the internal decision-making process and moves into its execution. Achilles is still angry, yet he chooses a greater future good over the present lesser good of inflicting revenge. Thus his will commands his intellect to move the rest of his faculties to calm his anger and exact an impermanent revenge on Agamemnon through words, which he presently uses in casting aspersions on Agamemnon: “You wine sack, with a dog’s eyes, with a deer’s heart. Never / once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people / for battle.”³⁶ Achilles thus manages to give partial vent to his anger while calling into question Agamemnon’s excellence by suggesting that he shirks some of his responsibilities as a ruler.

The circumstances of Achilles’ action further commend his relative prudence. His own greatness demands he exact some vengeance,

³⁴ Homer, *The Iliad*, I. 188–192.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, I. 211.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, I. 225–227.

but Agamemnon's kingship forbids his murder. Killing Agamemnon in front of the other Greeks, moreover, and over such relatively trivial matters (when viewed within the context of the Trojan conflict), would appear most unseemly.

This brief exchange, of course, does not close the argument, and Achilles takes a further revenge against Agamemnon by withdrawing from battle. Whether or not this action itself is just does not concern us at present. We see, rather, the brilliance of such a tactic in inflicting vengeance on Agamemnon. Any organization is directed to its goal through its highest member. Agamemnon, as the putative commander-in-chief of the Greeks, is charged with organizing his people in order to defeat the Trojans. Achilles' intensity of being, born of his semi-divine descent, makes him an indispensable part of the movement toward the Greek end. At the same time, it is his strength which allows him to defy Agamemnon and leave the battlefield, thus stripping Agamemnon of much of his potency. A general cannot do what each of his soldiers can do, and Agamemnon, whatever spiritual greatness may be conveyed upon the sceptered king, cannot make war with the strength of Achilles.

Indeed, so great is the slaughter Hektor wreaks against the Greeks unaided by Achilles that Agamemnon, repenting of his show of kingly strength, sends Odysseus, Aias, and Phoinix to remonstrate with Achilles, offering him the return of Briseis along with tenfold further honors. Here we find Achilles playing the lyre, "pleasuring his heart, and singing of men's fame."³⁷ Plead as Agamemnon's ambassadors will, though, they find Achilles impassive, for he has begun to philosophize. The discomfort of his anger, putting him in touch with the reality unfolding around him as well as with his own faculties, has caused him to question the very nature of the life he has led so far. "Yet why," he asks, "must the Argives fight with the Trojans . . . Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones / who love their wives?"³⁸ Mostly,

³⁷ *Ibid.*, IX. 189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, IX. 337-341.

though, he has reflected on the reality of death and thus begun to ask how he might best be happy: does he leave the battle, foregoing glory for a long life, or does he win glory in battle and become himself the subject of song?³⁹ In short, none of those things Agamemnon can offer can compare with the value of Achilles' life and freedom.

Thus anger has driven Achilles from the battle. His absence has in a sense exacted vengeance against Agamemnon; nonetheless, Achilles remains dissatisfied, as he tells Aias: "Yet still the heart in me swells up in anger, when I remember / the disgrace that he [Agamemnon] wrought upon me before the Argives."⁴⁰ The proper distribution of the communal good has not yet been effected between Achilles and Agamemnon, and the reader is left with the sense that, though Achilles has chosen to sail away in the morning, he does so without truly soothing his heart, which craves the deeds of heroes.

Indeed, Achilles will remain in Troy, but it is only through friendship, which in St. Thomas's understanding is a kind of perfected justice, that Achilles is brought back into harmony with the rest of the Greek organization. Patroklos appears to be Achilles' closest friend. The two share the same quarters, and Homer calls them beloved companions. They meet Aristotle's criteria for friendship, yet tension creeps in even there on account of Achilles' anger. By Book Sixteen, Hektor has brought his onslaught against the Greeks to its climax; destruction appears imminent. Patroklos thus approaches Achilles in tears, calling upon him to take up the spear on behalf of his countrymen or at least to allow Patroklos to wear his friend's armor in the hope that the mere appearance of Achilles will strike terror into the Trojans.⁴¹

The friends' enacting this plan highlights the difference mentioned above between dimensive and virtual quantity. The fact that Patroklos can wear Achilles' armor drives home the point that the latter

³⁹ *Ibid.*, IX. 411–415.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, IX. 646–647.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, XVII. 1–45.

is not greater than the other Greeks in mere physical terms. His distinction lies rather in the intensity of his being.

The plan bears fruit in multiple ways. In the first place, Patroklos, disguised as his friend, does manage to turn back the Trojans. His *aristeia* gives him victory over even one so godly as Sarpedon, son of Zeus. This, however, brings Patroklos against Hektor, a conflict in which the latter emerges bearing the glorious armor.⁴²

A new anger thus takes hold of Achilles, a kind of sacred rage on behalf of his friend. Two friends, as it were, share one life. Patroklos' death thus strikes at Achilles' own life, proving to him that even many years clear of the battlefield could not shield him against death, unless he should wish to maintain a friendless existence; such a life, Aristotle and Aquinas point out, is unsuited to man. Achilles speaks of this sorrow to his mother: "my dear companion has perished, / Patroklos, whom I loved beyond all other companions, / as well as my own life."⁴³ This sorrow results in Achilles' return to the field of battle, though he knows that this decision will issue in his death: "Then deeply disturbed Achilleus of the swift feet answered . . . 'I must die soon, then; since I was not to stand by my companion / when he was killed'."⁴⁴ In addition to the blow against his life in his friend's death, Achilles recognizes the injustice he has committed against Patroklos and thus against himself in staying clear of the field of battle. His anger, formerly bent on Agamemnon, now seems chiefly aimed at Hektor and at himself. He must exact vengeance, and justice here can only be restored, ultimately, by his death, prophesied to be consequent on Hektor's.

It seems Achilles has mulled over his anger for too long, overstepping the legitimate bounds of counsel, for the fury with which he rages now exceeds the bounds of nature. "As inhuman fire sweeps on . . . and sets ablaze the depth of the timber . . . so Achilleus / swept

⁴² *Ibid.*, XVI. 440ff.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, XVIII. 80–82.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, XVIII. 97–99.

everywhere with his spear like something more than a mortal.”⁴⁵ Homer’s qualification of the fire as inhuman highlights the brute force of Achilles’ rage. So high does this fire rage that Achilles finds himself at war with nature in the form of the river Xanthos.⁴⁶

Achilles’ inhumanity peaks in his despoiling the body of Hektor, allowing the other Greeks repeatedly to stab his naked frame, and finally in dragging the body about the plain for all the Trojan onlookers to see. Indeed, Homer calls this “shameful treatment,”⁴⁷ a description repeated when, in the next book, Achilles devises further ill for his enemy’s body.

Achilles here seems to miss the mean of appropriate action. Nonetheless, perhaps his outburst can be read as an overcorrection toward the mean, just as bending a tree to the opposite direction the wind has bowed it will bring about a correction in its standing. We see at any rate that Achilles’ rage, followed by his providing for Patroklos’ pyre, allows Achilles to return to an appropriate place within the Greek organization. He resumes cordial interactions with Agamemnon, and he organizes a day of games to raise the spirits of his battle-weary companions. Nonetheless, anger at injustice to a friend may not pass as quickly as simple injustice against oneself, and sadness remains upon Peleus’ son.⁴⁸

The violence upon Achilles’ mind seems at last to be dispelled in his encounter with Priam, come to the Achaian camp to ransom Hektor’s body. The two weep together, Priam for his son, Achilles for his father and for Patroklos. Achilles returns Hektor’s body and then welcomes Priam to dinner and to rest in his own tent. Homer leaves us with an image of Achilles granting Priam’s requests regarding Hektor’s mourning period and burial. The proper ordering of goods, or at least as

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, XX. 490–493. Emphasis added.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, XXI. 222ff.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, XXII. 395.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, XXIV. 3ff.

near an approximation thereto as a Trojan War allows, has been reestablished. Finally, Achilles has “taken full satisfaction in sorrow / and the passion for it [has] gone from his mind and body.”⁴⁹

Despite the relative return to justice realized at the *Iliad*’s conclusion, Achilles does not appear at any point to have achieved happiness. His frequent characterization as one of the sulkier characters in Homer’s poetry seems supremely justified by his final account of human sufferings to Priam: “There is not / any advantage to be won from grim lamentation. / Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals, / that we live in unhappiness.”⁵⁰ He then proceeds to explain the two urns of Zeus, one of evils and one of blessings. The vision of human life thus painted, one in which happiness is almost entirely dependent on fortune (and the seeds of fortune, both good and ill, are held in urns!) is exceedingly grim. Achilles seems even to have adopted a kind of proto-Stoicism, a life aimed at the avoidance of all emotional disturbances, a viewpoint any student of Aquinas has seen repeatedly rejected.

Here, perhaps, we encounter the final consequence of Achilles’ anger. It was anger which initially put him in touch with the reality of the war unfolding around him and brought him to question the best means to happiness. His withdrawal from battle was effective in exacting vengeance from Agamemnon, who was also placed in contact with the reality of his situation, an untenable one without the aid of Achilles. It was brooding too long over this anger—in effect, allowing the period of counsel to exceed its fitting limit—which caused Achilles to fail in his own capacity as leader of the Myrmidons, leading to Patroklos’ death and his own. Thus the anger of Achilles, which “put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians.”⁵¹

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, XXIV. 513–514.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XXIV. 523–526.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, I. 2.

Postscript: Through Action to the Hidden God

Human beings, St. Thomas tells us again and again, take their knowledge from the senses. Indeed, for any normally constituted human being, it is virtually impossible not to sense at all times. We close our eyes but continue to hear; we close our mouths but feel the air against our skin. The immaterial discloses itself only to the deeply attentive. Thus it is no surprise that St. Thomas's philosophy is difficult, much more difficult, in many respects, than Homer's works. Aquinas attempts to deal with God and the mind as directly as possible, and the fineness of distinction demanded render his conclusions hard to apprehend.

St. Thomas's picture of the mind, with all its faculties and actions, seems further unrealistic those used to thinking of the human person as mechanistically defined. The complexity of his thought daunts those used to thinking critically, even those used to thinking critically about thinking. Nonetheless, comparing Homer's poetry and St. Thomas's philosophy, we see that two minds separated so vastly in time and space nonetheless correspond on questions of the way the human mind works. St. Thomas merely makes explicit the complexities embryonic in Homer's works.

St. Thomas's moral philosophy would seem thus buttressed by poetry. Perhaps we can draw similar conclusions about St. Thomas's vision of God. Even as God's presence can be felt on nearly every page of Aquinas's works, by so much more does the mystery of God himself seem to recede. The more he is known, the more hidden he seems to grow. Homer's gods are likewise present throughout his work. Contrary to Aquinas's God, though, the Grecian deities grow more obscure the nearer they approach, their anthropology conflicting all too harshly with their divinity. Thus the blind poet sings not the grandeur of God but the anger of man, unable to conceive the love that moves the stars.

**THE HIDDEN GOD. ACHILLES, AQUINAS, AND MORAL ACTION
IN AN ORDERED WORLD**

SUMMARY

The central goals of this essay are three: (1) to situate St. Thomas's moral psychology within his cosmology, with special emphasis on the notion of virtual quantity; (2) to illuminate and confirm that moral psychology through an examination of Achilles as Homer present him in the *Iliad*; (3) to suggest that if St. Thomas's picture of the psychological landscape can be validated by reference to Homer, then so, too, might his metaphysical portraiture bear more credence than it is typically awarded. Particular attention will be given to Achilles' anger and the psychological distinctions by which St. Thomas makes such anger and its attendant acts intelligible.

KEYWORDS

St. Thomas Aquinas, Homer, Achilles, moral psychology, virtual quantity, anger.

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