

POTENTIALLY EVERY CULTURE IS ALL CULTURES

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In Book 9 of the *Iliad*, Aias, Odysseus, and Phoenix, acting as messengers, ask Achilles to return to the Achaeans and to aid them in their battle against Troy. Achilles, offended by Agamemnon, had withdrawn and the situation of the Greeks had deteriorated. Now Agamemnon offers an enormous present and the hand of his daughter in marriage (114ff.). For the messengers, this is suitable compensation and they urge Achilles to relent. Achilles whines and splutters—and refuses. In a long speech, he tries to explain the reasons for his attitude. “Equal fate,” he says, “befalls the negligent and the valiant fighter; equal honor goes to the worthless and the virtuous.” Striving after honor no longer makes any sense.

The messengers fall “silent, dismayed at his word, for he had resisted in a stunning way” (43of.)—but they soon start arguing again. Phoenix points out that the gods whose powers far exceed those of humans can be reconciled by gifts and sacrifice (497ff.); Aias adds that even the murder of a brother or of a son has its blood price (632f.). This is how conflicts were resolved in the past and this is how Achilles should act now. Aias ascribes Achilles’ resistance to cruelty (632). Achilles remains adamant.

Returning to the camp, Odysseus reports what has happened. Again the Greeks fall “silent, for he had spoken in a stunning way” (693f.). They explain

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Achilles' attitude by his anger (679) and his pride (700). Then Diomedes suggests they forget about Achilles and start fighting without him (697ff.).

What we have here is a conflict of attitudes—contrariness and persistent anger on one side, surprise and a plea to be reasonable on the other. The parties try to justify their attitudes. The messengers seem close to common sense. Achilles sounds a little strange.

The episode is problematic, in a familiar and annoying but manageable way. The episode becomes profound and paradoxical when lifted out of its natural habitat and inserted into a model or theory. One theory that has become rather popular assumes that languages, cultures, stages in the development of a profession, a tribe, or a nation are closed, in the sense that certain events transcend their capacities. Languages, for example, are restrained by rules. Persons who violate the rules do not enter new territory; they leave the domain of meaningful discourse. Even facts in these circumstances dissolve, because they are shaped by the language and subjected to its limitations. Looking at the exchange in *Iliad* 9 with such ideas in mind, some scholars have turned it into a rather sinister affair. Thus Adam Parry writes: Achilles

is the one Homeric hero who does not accept the common language. . . . {He} has no language with which to express his disillusionment. Yet he expresses it, and in a remarkable way. He does it by misusing the language he disposes of. He asks questions that cannot be answered and makes demands that cannot be met. . . . {He} can in no sense including that of language (unlike, say, Hamlet) leave the society which has become alien to him.¹

Parry does not summarize the episode, he interprets it. And he does not interpret it in accordance with the poet's scenario, but provides a framework of his own. The framework is not arbitrary—it is based on an empirical study of the Homeric text—and that text has indeed certain regularities. However, the evidence for these regularities does not imply or suggest that they are never violated, or that they are necessary, or that they constitute meaning so that whoever violated them would be talking nonsense. Such an assumption not only goes beyond the text, it is inherently implausible. First, because texts, mathematical texts included, lack the required uniformity. (Parry, for example, has been criticized for his streamlining of Homer.)² Second, because ingenious individuals often give sensible answers to allegedly inexpressible questions. There are of course misunderstandings. Even ordinary events baffle some people, enrage others, and render still others speechless. But we also find people who can explain events

1. "The Language of Achilles," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* 87 (1956): 6f.

2. See Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Becoming Homer," *The New York Review of Books*, 5 March 1992, 52ff.

that baffle or enrage others, failing to recognize the limits of sense postulated by scholars.³

Achilles says that honor and the rewards of honor are different things. According to Parry, such a separation does not make sense. Honor and the rewards of honor cannot be separated, not even “in principle.”

Now it is indeed true that “the Homeric notion of honor,” to use a phrase that often occurs in this connection, is a social and not a metaphysical notion. Honor is an aggregate of individual and collective actions and events. Some of the elements of the aggregate are: the role (of the individual possessing or lacking honor) in battle, in the assembly, during internal dissension; his place at public ceremonies; the spoils and gifts he receives when the battle is finished; and, naturally, his behavior on all these occasions. Honor is present when (most of) the elements of the aggregate are present, absent otherwise (*Il.* 12, 310ff.—Sarpedon’s speech). An explanation of honor, accordingly, would use a list, not comprehensive concepts.⁴ We may infer that a way of speaking that conflicts with these features will cause surprise, but we cannot assume that surprising speech is without meaning.

A brief look at the rest of the epic shows indeed that Achilles’ remarks do not come out of the blue. They arise from a situation—the conflict between custom and Agamemnon’s actions—that lies squarely within the common sense of the time. Sensitized by his anger, Achilles remembers that merit was disregarded not only in his case but in other cases as well, and he generalizes: Honor is an orphan (318f). The starting point of this generalization (the description of Agamemnon’s actions) conforms to the archaic notion of honor; so do the cases Achilles remembers. The traditional concept allowed for discrepancies and identified them by using a standard. The full generalization—honor and its rewards *always* diverge—severs the connection between the standard and the events that gave it substance, at least in the opinion of some scholars.

3. For examples, see Caro Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (New York: Penguin Books, 1982; first published in Italian, *Il formaggio e i vermi: il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* [Torino: G. Einaudi, 1976]), and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Vintage Books, 1979; first published in French, *Montaillou, village Occitan de 1294 à 1324* [Paris: Gallimard, 1975]). Already in 1552, Copernicanism was part of Florentine gossip, which found ways of diffusing arguments against it (details in Leonardo Olschki, *Geschichte der neusprachlichen wissenschaftlichen Literatur*, vol. 2, Vaduz: Krauz Reprint, 1965 [first published in 1992], 134ff.). Some aspects of Florentine public life during the quattrocento implied rather

unusual views about personal identity. An example is Brunelleschi’s joke on Manetto di Jacopo Ammanarini (analyzed by Decio Gioseffi in “Realtà e conoscenza nel Brunelleschi,” *La Critica del Arte* 85 [March 1965]: 8ff.). People who accept the Resurrection, the Virgin Birth of Christ, who believe in the miracle stories of the *Legenda Aurta*, and who take the Bible literally, as did many outstanding British scientists of the nineteenth century, the young Darwin included, are not likely to be stopped by “linguistic boundaries.”

4. Lists are not restricted to Homer. They occur in Babylonian science, in early Greek science, in commonsense thinking, and even in Plato: the first answers Socrates receives to his what-is questions are lists, not definitions.

Achilles goes further. He implies that the general injustice he notices lies in the nature of things. Using modern terms, we can formulate this implication by saying that the traditional standards are no longer parts of social practice. Yet they continue to play a role. This is the first indication of a dichotomy that was soon to assume considerable importance—the dichotomy between (rich, concrete, but misleading) appearances and a (simple, abstract, almost empty, but still very important) reality. And this is also the reason why some scholars say that Achilles' speech does not make sense: a general rift between appearance and reality does not fit into "the Homeric world view."

But Homeric thought was not unprepared for grand subdivisions. Divine knowledge and human knowledge, divine power and human power, human intention and human speech (an example mentioned by Achilles himself: 312f.) were opposed to each other in ways that resemble the distinction Achilles is using. One might say that having cut the social links of honor, Achilles strengthens the ties of honor to divine judgment, especially to the judgment of Zeus (607f.). Such ties already existed; the judgment of the gods always played an important social role. Even the exclusive relevance of divine judgment hinted at by Achilles was prepared by the eminence of the gods and the steadily increasing power of one particular divinity—Zeus—in whom "all lines converge."⁵ Considered in retrospect, it seems that the situation described by Achilles was there all along, though buried in a complex net that tied divine actions to human actions and human actions to each other. Achilles identifies the situation, lifts it out of its surroundings, and simplifies it by trimming some social connections. Even this last action is not arbitrary, or "creative," for Achilles has "inductive evidence" for the weakness and, perhaps, irrelevance of the connections that he trims. Nor is he left without standards, for the judgment of the gods remains, both for him and his visitors. What we have, then, in Book 9, is a change of emphasis supported by reasons and driven by Achilles' anger. We are a long way from the disaster announced by Parry and systematized by the champions of incommensurability.

Still, we may ask if the change of focus corresponded to and was perhaps supported by some more general tendency. Had Achilles or the poet who composed his lines lived in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C., I could have answered: There was a relevant tendency, closely connected with social developments. By that period, abstract groups had replaced neighborhoods (and the concrete relationships they embodied) as the units of political action (Cleisthenes); money had replaced barter with its attention to context and detail; the relations between military leaders and their soldiers had become increasingly impersonal; local gods

5. Walter F. Otto, *The Homeric Gods* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 42.

had merged in the course of travel, which increased their power but reduced their humanity; tribal and cultural idiosyncracies had been evened out by trade, politics, and other types of international exchange; important parts of life had become bland and colorless, and terms tied to specifics accordingly had lost in content, or in importance, or had simply disappeared.⁶ I could have added that individual human actions (such as the actions of Solon, of Cleisthenes, of their associates) played a large role in the process, but not with these later results as their aim. Seen “from the outside,” we have an adaptation of one “conspiracy”⁷ (“Homeric Common Sense”) to others (the newly emerging structures I have just described). Seen “from the inside,” we have a discovery: important features of the world are being revealed.

But Achilles did not live in the seventh or sixth centuries. He spoke at a time when the developments I enumerated were in their infancy. They had started; they had not yet produced their more obvious results. Achilles’ speech contributed to the development and thus contains an element of invention. The invented features were part of a slowly rising structure, which means that Achilles also made a discovery. Subjectivity certainly played a role; it was Achilles’ anger that made him resonate to what others did not yet notice. What he saw in a sense was already there—the judgment of the gods was always more decisive than that of mortals—which means that Achilles’ vision had an “objective core.” But it is still “subjective,” for the move towards increasing abstractness, and the related separation of reality and appearance, were not the only developments.

As becomes clear from funeral inscriptions, passages of comedy, sophistic debates, medical and historical treatises, from the unwanted lists Socrates received to his what-is questions, and from Aristotle’s recommendation of precisely such lists (cf. *Pol.* 1260b24ff.), the view that things, ideas, actions, processes are aggregates of (relatively independent) parts and that giving an account means enumerating instances, not subsuming them under a single term, retained its popularity right into the classical age of Greece. Geometric thought was a seed without a well-defined genetic program; accompanied by an ever-increasing cacophony of political, philosophical, military, artistic debates, it grew into many different plants. Nowhere in this process do we find the breaks, the lacunae, the unbridgeable chasms suggested by the idea of closed domains of discourse.

Now if we drop the artifice of closed domains, as simple common sense advises, then we must also drop the artifice of precise meanings—words, state-

6. For the contraction of the rich spectra of perceptual terms, see chap. 1 of Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes: Studien z. Entstehung d. europ. Denkens bei d. Griechen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1975).

7. “[A]ny language . . . is a conspiracy against experience in the sense of being a collective attempt to simplify and arrange experience into manageable parcels.” Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350–1450* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 44.

ments, even principles are ambiguous and change with the situations in which they are being used. Interactions among cultures, linguistic domains, professional groups are going on all the time, and it is therefore absurd to speak either of objectivity or of relative sense within well-defined boundaries. Both objectivism (and the associated idea of truth) and relativism assume limits that are not found in practice and postulate nonsense wherever people are engaged in interesting though occasionally difficult forms of collaboration. Objectivism and relativism are chimeras.

A discourse consisting of clear and distinct propositions (actions, plans, and so forth) has a very short breath—and I agree that such a discourse will often be interrupted by “irrational” events and soon replaced by a new and “incommensurable” discourse. If the history of science or the wider history of cultural interactions depended on a discourse of this kind, then they would consist of an ocean of irrationality punctured by tiny islands of sense. If, on the other hand, the elements of an argument, a worldview, a culture, a theoretical framework (such as classical mathematics) are allowed some leeway, so that they either keep their identity through very drastic changes (in which case one could say that they have potential meanings that are actualized in various ways) or change their content without violating the worldview to which they belong, then we have no reason to assume that our ways of conveying meaning have any limits. On the contrary, we can now search for features that connect the “inside” of a language, or a theory, or a culture, with its “outside,” and thus reduce conceptually induced blindness to the real causes of incomprehension, which are ordinary, normal, run-of-the-mill inertia, dogmatism, inattention, and stupidity. Differences between languages, art forms, customs are not being denied. But I would ascribe them to accidents of location and/or history, not to clear, unambiguous, and immobile cultural essences: *potentially every culture is all cultures*.

The argument I have presented in this rather abstract way is developed with passion, wit, and many examples in Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth*, whose second edition has just appeared.⁸ Rosaldo is describing classical objectivist anthropology, which not only postulates closed systems but also tries to clean them up: “Most anthropological studies of death eliminate emotions by assuming the position of the most detached observer.” Aiming at the discovery of strict rules that guide behavior like a juggernaut, objectivist studies “make it difficult to show how social forms can be both imposed *and* used spontaneously.” They fail to recognize “how much of life happens in ways that one neither plans or expects.” Boundary problems, not central events, teach us about the full resources of a culture. At the boundaries, writes Gloria Andaluz, a Chicana lesbian whom Rosaldo quotes, a person

8. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

copies by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (216)

Is it not clear that (Rosaldo speaking) “in the present postcolonial world, the notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe no longer seems tenable, except perhaps as a ‘useful fiction’ or a revealing distortion?” (217).

The situation is no different in the sciences. Despite a persistent fog of objectivism and despite the relativistic tricks inspired by Kuhn’s idea of a paradigm, many scientists have lived and are still living with ambiguity and contradiction. They could not possibly live in any other way. New problems need new approaches. But new approaches do not fall like manna from the heaven of creativity. Old ideas continue to be used, they are slowly twisted around until some orderly minds perceive an entirely new structure, with new limits of sense, and start doing what they do best—they nail it down. This, incidentally, is the reason why the presentation of scientific *results* differs so drastically from what happens during *research*, i.e., while people are still *thinking*, and gives such a misleading picture of it. Of course, ideas can get stuck; imagination can be dimmed by dogma, financial pressures, education, and boredom. If that happens, then the idea of a closed system with precise concepts and rules slavishly followed will appear to be the only correct representation of Thought. But that situation should be avoided, not praised.

To my mind, the most important consequence of the new attitude towards cultures that underlies Rosaldo’s book is that practices that seem legitimate when referred to a closed framework cease to be sacrosanct. If every culture is potentially all cultures, then cultural differences lose their ineffability and become *special and changeable manifestations of a common human nature*. Authentic murder, torture, and suppression become ordinary murder, torture, and suppression, *and should be treated as such*. Feminism has tasks not only in the United States, but even more so in Africa, India, and South America. Efforts to achieve peace need no longer respect some alleged cultural integrity that often is nothing but the rule of one or another tyrant. And there is much reason to suspect some of the ingredients of the ideology of political correctness.

But, in making use of this new freedom of action, we must be careful not to continue old habits. Objective judgments are out; so is an abstract and ideology-driven protection of cultures. Drastic interventions are not excluded but should be made *only after* an extended contact, not just with a few “leaders,” but with the

populations directly involved. Having discarded objectivity and cultural separation and having emphasized intercultural processes, those who perceive medical, nutritional, environmental problems or problems of human or, more specifically, female rights have to start such processes on the spot *and with due attention to the opinions of the locals*. There exist movements that already proceed in this particularizing, nonobjective manner. Liberation theology and some approaches in the area of development are examples. Let us support these movements and learn from them instead of continuing old-style epistemologies and other “authentic” games.