Hektor's Changing Motivations: Individual Interests, Societal Interests, and the Heroic Ethic in Iliadic Decision Making

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Purpose and Relevance

This paper will argue that the changes in Hektor's motivations – between his conversation with Andromakhe in *Iliad* VI and his confrontation with Akhilleus in *Iliad* XXII – provide evidence that the driving force behind Homeric decision making is the heroic ethic rather than individual interests or societal interests.

Because of Homer's profound impact on the development of later Greek values, showing that the heroic ethic is at the center of Homeric decision making has implications for understanding Greek decision making in later times; if shame, *timē*, and *kleos* drive behavior in the *Iliad*, they must also be a factor in behavior that draws on the *Iliad* as a source of cultural guidance. Establishing the importance of the heroic ethic in early Greek decision making (at least in the idealized form presented in Homer) thus supports interpretations of historical events – sometimes difficult to explain in terms of normal behavioral motivations – that take the heroic ethic into account as a contributing variable.[1]

To take but one example, consider Leonidas' decision to stay at Thermopylae despite overwhelming odds and certain death. Neither individual interests nor societal interests provide a particularly satisfying explanation for this decision,[2] but it makes good sense in the framework of the heroic ethic, in which honor and shame drive warriors to battle regardless of survival considerations.[3] To say that Leonidas made his decision *because* of Homer's portrayal of the

[1] This being said, care must be taken to view human motivation as the complex psychological phenomenon that it truly is. While establishing the importance of the heroic ethic in Homeric decision making does give support to a historiographical approach that considers the heroic ethic in the analysis of later events, the effect may be more subtle than direct, and should thus be viewed as a pertinent factor rather than a certain rule.

[2] Not that there hasn't been scholarship on the subject; for a brief discussion of conventional views of Leonidas' motivations, see John Francis Lazenby, *The Defence of Greece, 490-479 B.C.* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1993), 144-145.

[3] Cf. Odysseus' reasoning after his comrades desert him on the front lines, XI.404-410.

heroic ethic in relation to decision making is overstepping the reasonable, but to say that it likely *contributed* to his decision is easily defensible… if Homer portrays the heroic ethic as the driving force behind decision making.

Hektor's Motivations in *Iliad* VI

The importance of Hektor's conversation with Andromakhe vis-à-vis Hektor's motivations must be understood in relation to its position in the epic. Book VI is the first time Homer spends significant time on Hektor's characterization, and instead of being on the battlefield where a Homeric warrior belongs, Hektor is within the walls of Troy. The significance of this cannot be overstated; Homer must be intentionally setting us up to understand Hektor's character by his interaction with his family.[4] In this way, Hektor's individual interests – his desire to be with his family and protect them in the future by surviving – are juxtaposed to the interests of society and the expectations of warrior behavior from the heroic ethic.

When departing from Helen and Paris, Hektor explains his decision to visit his family before returning to the field of battle: "I am first going to my own house, so I can visit my own people, my beloved wife and my son, who is little, since I do not know if ever again I shall come back this way, or whether the gods will strike me down at the hands of the Achaians."[5] In this statement, Hektor demonstrates that he is self-aware with respect to the personal sacrifice he is making. However, it is not Hektor alone who understands his choice – Andromakhe's first words upon meeting Hektor in front of the Skaian gates are regarding this very same thing:

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[4] See S. Farron, "The Character of Hector in the 'Iliad'" *Acta Classica* 21 (1978): 41. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24591547. The location of the meeting (at the gates – on the border between his life inside the city as a family man and outside the city as a warrior) is also supportive of this point, as is Homer's use of Astyanax's fear of Hektor's warrior visage in VI.466-473.

[5] Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The Iliad Of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 181. VI.365-368.

> Dearest, your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow; for presently the Achaians, gathering together, will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny… Please take pity on me then, stay here on the rampart, that you might not leave your child an orphan, your wife a widow.[6]

Andromakhe's appeal to Hektor to stay within the safety of the city frames Hektor's choice not only in terms of lost time with his family, but also in terms of the consequences that it could have on their future. The tragic irony at this moment is intense, for, as members of the audience, we know that Andromakhe will be taken as a concubine by Pyrrhus, and that Astyanax will be thrown from the walls of the city. Homer uses this irony to explicitly link Hektor's determination to fight with negative consequences for his family, and, therefore, his individual interests.[7]

In his response to Andromakhe Hektor reveals that shame is one of the pressures leading him to rejoin the battle: "I would feel deep shame before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing garments, if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting."[8] Hektor's defense of Troy is here presented as a direct consequence of his identity as Homeric warrior – by not fighting, he would be rejecting the heroic ethic. As shall be seen again below, shame was a primary means by which the heroic ethic exerted its influence over individuals, and Hektor's shame-driven defense of the city is a paradigmatic example of the phenomenon. Hektor also states that "the spirit will not let me [shrink aside from the fighting], since I have learned to be valiant and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the Trojans, winning for myself great glory, and for my father."[9] While Hektor mentions this rather offhandedly here – second in position and importance to shame as a motivating factor – the idea of winning glory (Gk. κλέος,

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[6] Ibid., 182. VI.406-432.
[7] For a similar discussion with respect to Hektor's prayer for Astyanax, see Farron, "The Character of Hector", 42-43.
[8] Lattimore, *The Iliad*, 183. VI.441-443.
[9] Ibid., 183. VI.444-446.

kleos) is an additional aspect of the heroic ethic present in his decision to leave his family for the field of war.

Hektor's last words to Andromakhe shed light on the role that societal interests play in his decision: "the men must see to the fighting, all men who are the people of Ilion, but I beyond others."[10] This statement shows that "all men who are the people of Ilion" are expected to fight – all those who call Troy home. The social obligation of self-defense is a concept just as ancient as war itself, and its manifestation here – though perhaps unsurprising – does support the idea that part of why Hektor is fighting is because it is in society's best interest for citizens to defend against foreign invaders, whether doing so aligns with their individual interests or not. It is also interesting to note that more is expected of Hektor because of who he is; in this we see that even in Homer's time, the burdens society placed on individuals varied as a function of social status.[11]

At this point in the epic, Homer shows Hektor's decision making governed by adherence to the heroic ethic and societal interests rather than his individual interests with respect to his family. However, "Hektor's concluding statements (448-465), that he is more disturbed by the prospect of Andromakhe's being a slave than of Troy's being destroyed and that he wishes he would die before that happens, shows a set of priorities that are more domestic than heroic."[12] That is to say, while he fights because he must, his heart remains with his family in the city.

Hektor's Motivations in *Iliad* XXII

By book XXII, much has changed. The Trojans were very nearly successful in burning the Greek ships and ending the war once and for all. Hektor has had a hand in the death of

[10] Ibid., 184. VI.493-494.
[11] Cf. later developments regarding the role of hoplites in defending *poleis* and the concept of *leitourgia* in Athens.
[12] Farron, "The Character of Hector", 42.

Patroklos, and has taken his armor; Akhilleus views him as responsible, and Hektor has become the focus of his *mēnis*. Hektor has ignored the advice of Poulydamas, costing many Trojans their lives. Now he stands before the approaching Akhilleus. In a way, this scene in book XXII is a deliberate recasting of the situation of *Iliad* VI: Hektor, partway inside and partway outside Troy, must make a decision to fight beyond the walls or take refuge within them.[13]

Under these circumstances, the plea of Priam forms the basis for understanding the role of society's interests in Hektor's decision: "Come then inside the wall, my child, so that you can rescue the Trojans and the women of Troy, neither win the high glory for Peleus' son, and yourself be robbed of your very life."[14] By this point in time Homer has made it clear that Hektor represents Troy – so long as Hektor is well, Troy is well. Thus, Priam appeals to Hektor not only on behalf of himself – as Hektor's father – but on behalf of the people of the city. He extends his appeal by speaking of the effects that the city's fall would have on its inhabitants:

> …my sons destroyed and my daughters dragged away captive and the chambers of marriage wrecked and the innocent children taken and dashed to the ground in the hatefulness of war, and the wives of my sons dragged off by the accursed sons of the Achaians. And myself last of all, my dogs in front of the doorway will rip me raw…[15]

Each category of Trojan – men of fighting age, young women, children, wives, the elderly – would face horrendous consequences should the city fall; essentially, Priam tries to sway Hektor by implying that he would be responsible for such devastation should he throw his life away instead of considering his role in protecting the people. However, this tactic proves to be unsuccessful, and Priam's plea is entirely ignored; unlike in book VI, Hektor does not heed society's interests in making his decision.

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[13] The lamentations of Hekabe, Helen, and Andromakhe in Iliad XXIV also call to mind the circumstances of book VI, wherein Hektor talked to each of the women in turn.
[14] Lattimore, *The Iliad*, 458. XXII.56-58.
[15] Ibid., 458-459. XXII.62-67.

The influence of the heroic ethic in Hektor's decision is most apparent in Hektor's conversation with his "spirit" (*thumos*) as he faces the approaching Akhilleus:[16]

> If I go now inside the wall and the gateway, Poulydamas will be first to put a reproach upon me, since he tried to make me lead the Trojans inside the city on that accursed night when brilliant Akhilleus rose up, and I would not obey him, but that would have been far better. Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people, I feel shame before the Trojans and the Trojan women with trailing robes, that someone who is less of a man than I will say of me: 'Hektor believed in his own strength and ruined his people.' Thus they will speak; and as for me, it would be much better at that time, to go against Akhilleus, and slay him, and come back, or else be killed by him in glory in front of the city.[17]

In this interior monologue, two reasons for facing Akhilleus arise: first, to avoid facing the loss of honor (Gk. τιμή, *timē*) and shame occasioned by rejecting Poulydamas' advice to retreat instead of pressing the attack – a mistake which cost many Trojan lives;[18] second, to gain *kleos* through slaying Akhilleus in single combat. Both of these reasons are fundamentally intertwined with the heroic ethic – because Hektor is a Homeric warrior who jeopardized the entire wellbeing of society with his actions, he must find a way to reintegrate himself.[19] Killing Akhilleus would restore his *timē* by winning *kleos,* and bravely dying a warriors death in combat would also serve to bring him back into the fold. According to the heroic ethic, fighting Akhilleus is the right thing for Hektor to do.

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[16] On the relationship between conversation with the *thumos* and decision making, and its particular manifestation here, see R. W. Sharples, "'But Why Has My Spirit Spoken with Me Thus?': Homeric Decision-Making," *Greece & Rome* 30, no. 1 (1983): 1-2. http://www.jstor.org/stable/642739.

[17] Lattimore, *The Iliad*, 460. XXII.105-110.

[18] For a discussion of this decision, see Matthew Clark, "Poulydamas and Hektor," *College Literature* 34, no. 2 (2007): 94-98. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25115422. The earlier part of this work details the nature of the relationship between Hektor and Poulydamas, which is important in understanding why the shame Hektor feels now is so intense; not only did he ignore the advice of Poulydamas once and make a poor decision, he did so multiple times.

[19] Some might argue that restoring his *timē* is essentially an individualistic motive, but this begs the question of the importance of honor in society in the first place.

In this interior monologue, we also find Hektor's rejection of his own individual interests. Despite considering the possibility of saving himself by approaching Akhilleus unarmed as a suppliant, offering Helen and half the city's wealth, Hektor decides against it. While it true that part of his motivation for rejecting the idea is because Akhilleus kills suppliants, it is also true that Hektor's odds in combat are slim, as he well understands. The fact that he is even considering such a course of action – making terms with Akhilleus without any discussion with his father or the council, apparently in ransom for his own life – shows that Hektor knows that fighting Akhilleus is certain death. Yet, despite this knowledge, Hektor decides to fight nonetheless: "Better to bring on the fight with him as soon as it may be. We shall see to which the Olympian grants the glory".[20]

Nowhere in this thought process did Hektor ever consider Andromakhe or Astyanax (although Hekabe mentions Andromakhe in her appeal). Gone is the concern Hektor voiced in book VI for Andromakhe's enslavement – more important to him then the destruction of the city at that point in time. Homer doesn't give an explanation for this lack of concern – why now Hektor does not even factor his family into his decision when it was essentially the focus of his decision in book VI (even though he ultimately chose to sacrifice his familial role for his role as a warrior) – but the absence of this variable in his decision is further evidence of a rejection of individual interests.

Discussion

While Hektor's flight from Akhilleus could arguably be considered an act of conscious self-preservation, the way Homer presents it is much more unconscious and instinctual; Hektor

[20] Lattimore, *The Iliad*, 460. XXII.129-130.

didn't decide to flee, he decided to fight (cf. XXII.129-130, quoted above).[21] For this reason, this paper analyzed Hektor's motivations in terms of his intention not his final action, for it is his intention that is truly reflective of his thought process.

Between *Iliad* VI and *Iliad* XXII Hektor's relationship to societal interests flipped: in book VI Hektor is aligned with the interests of society, fighting in self-defense of his home; in book XXII Hektor is opposed to the interests of society, ignoring the consequences of his death for various societal groups. This change suggests that societal interests in and of themselves were not the main factor in Hektor's decisions. Similarly, there is not continuity for individual interests: in book VI, Hektor is greatly concerned with the future of his family; in book XXII, his family does not appear to factor into his decision at all.

These observations point to some other driving force behind Hektor's decisions, a reason why he would choose to fight as a defender of the city in book VI – sacrificing his role as a family man – but choose to face Akhilleus alone to the detriment of the city – and with no apparent regard for his family – in book XXII. Unlike societal interests and individual interests, the heroic ethic is consistent across both books: in book VI, Hektor is portrayed as fighting due to shame (and a desire for *kleos*, to a lesser extent), while he is also portrayed as fighting due to shame in book XXII – and a more pronounced desire to win *kleos* (and thereby recover lost *timē*) by killing Akhilleus in single combat. In this consistency, Homer presents the heroic ethic as a larger driver of behavior than either societal or individual interests (which sometimes align with a decision based upon the heroic ethic, but sometimes do not).

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[21] Also see David West, "The Deaths of Hector and Turnus." *Greece & Rome* 21, no. 1 (1974): 21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/642548. This work is tangential, but consistently portrays Hektor's decision to flee as *panic* rather than a reasoned response: West's summary of the events leading to Hektor's death begins with "Hektor panicked … and run away."

This conclusion is not unreasonable given how strongly the Homeric warriors of the epic believe in their code. In perhaps the best-known evocation of the warrior's faith, Sarpedon spurs Glaukos to battle:

> Man, supposing you and I, escaping this battle, would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal, so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory. But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them, let us go on and win glory for ourselves or yield it to others.[22]

Given such devotion to the heroic ethic, it is only natural that it should play a large role in the decision making of its adherents.

For later Greeks, who perhaps did not equally share Sarpedon's convictions, the heroic ethic did not play as large a role in decision making. However, it is clear that the heroic ethic continued to play *some* role: if Homer portrays it as the driver of behavior in the *Iliad*, and later Greeks looked to Homer as a guide for proper behavior, then it follows that the question is not whether the heroic ethic influenced later behavior, but to what extent.

[22] Lattimore, *The Iliad*, 286. XII.322-328.

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