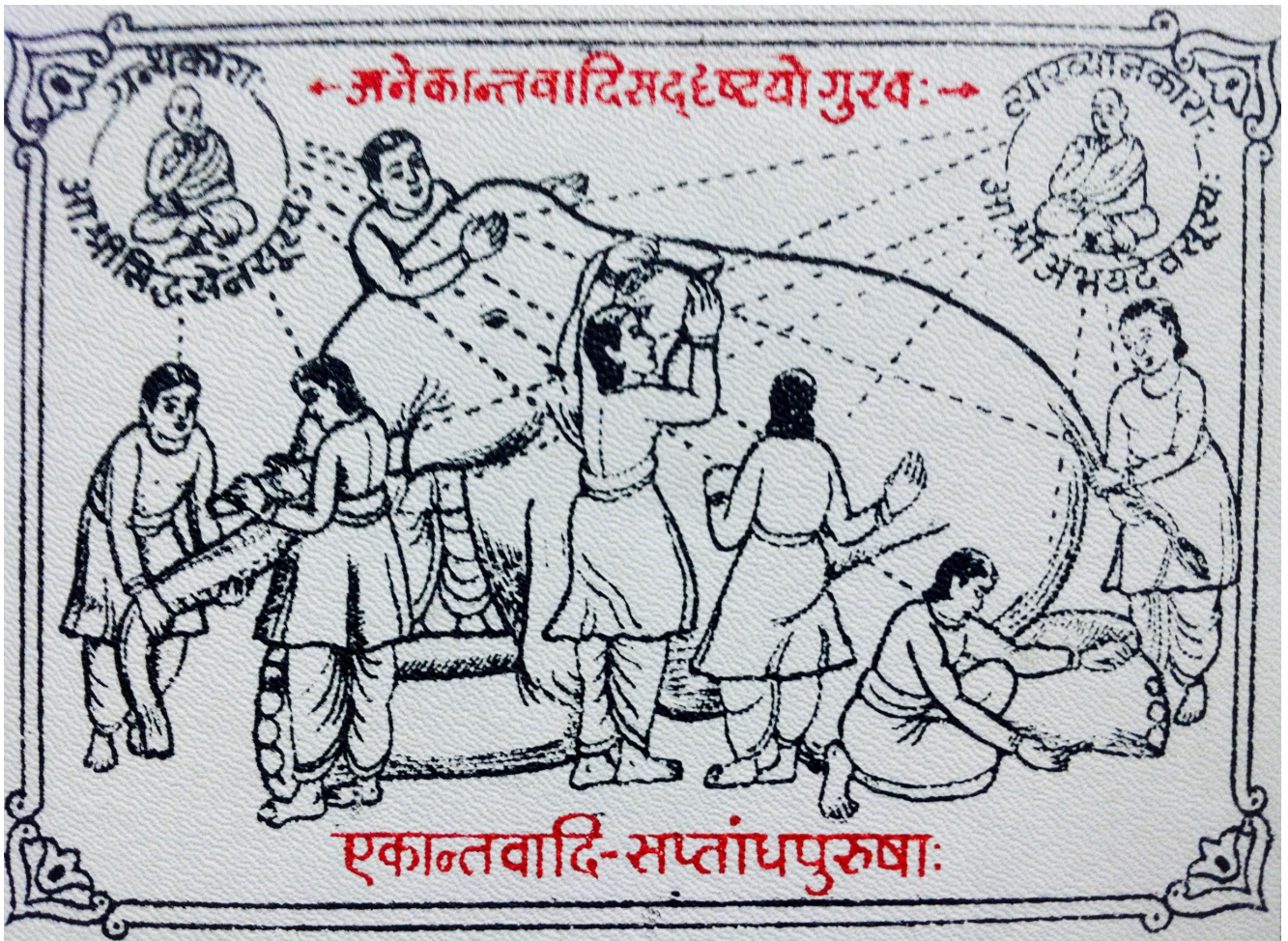


Knowing Your Father: DNA and Identity



“It is a wise child who knows its own father.”

—Homer, *The Odyssey*

Several women I know were stunned in later life by the discovery that the man they had long considered to be their father was not the man whose sperm actually fertilized their mother’s egg. Their pasts—all that they had taken for granted about their personal histories—suffered an upheaval, lifelong assumptions thrown into chaos, with a bombardment of new facts to explore and shape. Memories, experiences, assumptions became confused shards, any attempts to piece them together undermined by large chasms of ignorance.

In one case, the woman discovered through a long-withheld admission that her origin was the result of her mother's one-night stand with a stranger. In another involving a close friend, the discovery emerged after weeks of pondering the results of an ancestry.com DNA analysis. My friend's brother, two years younger, had mailed his sample first, just curious. His report came back that he was 43% Jewish and 50% Polish.

Perplexed, my friend agreed to be tested too, with the result of very similar percentages. She and her brother had always believed their families on both sides to be Roman Catholics who had originally emigrated from Poland. How could this be an accurate finding? The results also linked them to a young man in California. Through online detective work that included census data and a newspaper archive, she discovered that her biological father was the Jewish insurance salesman who had visited frequently to collect payment. The fact that he fathered two children clearly meant a long-term affair with her mother, not a drunken interlude. Eventually, my friend learned his name and saw a photograph of him. The emotional result was even more confusion and upset.

Heritage Erased: Dani Shapiro

The writer Dani Shapiro, in her mid-fifties, experienced a similar shock, but with an opposite ethnic surprise. All her life she had considered herself to be the daughter of a man called Paul Shapiro and a member of a prominent Orthodox Jewish family whose lineage went back for many generations on her father's side. In fact, according to DNA analysis, she was only half Jewish, the people she had considered extended family for more than fifty years now questionable in their relationship, the culture that had immersed her only partly hers. Blonde, pale, and blue-eyed, she was used to being told, you don't look Jewish, and now she knew why. Rather from emigrating from an Eastern European shtetl, her paternal ancestors had arrived in North America around the time of the Mayflower.

When Shapiro finally accepted the DNA evidence, she was devastated. She describes the reaction in her book *Inheritance*:

I woke up one morning and life was as I had always known it to be. There were certain things I thought I could count on. I looked at my hand, for example, and I knew it was my hand. My foot was my foot. My face, my face. My history, my history. After all, it's impossible to know the future, but we can be reasonably sure about the past. By the time I went to bed that night, my entire history—the life I had lived—had crumbled beneath me, like the buried ruins of an ancient forgotten city.

Before her son's bar mitzvah, she had taken care to instill to him his heritage: "It felt urgently important to me, to make Jacob aware of his ancestral lineage, the patch of earth from which he sprang, the source of a spirit passed down, a connection." Yet now she had lost a fundamental answer to the question, "Who am I?" Who was she and where did she belong?

She writes: "Philosophers, who love nothing more than to argue with one another, do seem to agree that a continued, uninterrupted sense of self, 'the indivisible thing which I call myself,' is necessarily implied in a consciousness of our own identity."

Existential Uprooting

For good or ill, even when tensions and alienations are deep, most people need to live with the conviction of being a member of an extended family and, in particular, being the child of a certain mom and a certain dad. That's where they came from, with all the biological, cultural, and historical baggage they carry through our lives. Even if they rebel against that heritage, they have a clear center, a distinct point of departure.

But what if those essential assumptions are suddenly wiped out

after a spit into a test tube or a discovered document or an uttered revelation?

From an existentialist perspective—the assumption that we are thrown into Being—we seek the foundation of an identity, something with which to authenticate ourselves—roots. That term can be taken in its cultural connotation as well as its botanical metaphor—tentacles that position us in a firm ground. Dani Shapiro and the others were uprooted by a categorical discovery. After the shock, they were compelled to plant themselves into fresh soil and endure the bewilderment of a new cultural environment.

Beyond the personal, the existential dilemma broadens into a theological dimension. The philosopher-critic Stanley Cavell explores these implications in the introduction of his study, *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*. A follower of Cartesian skepticism, he interprets those plays from that perspective, explaining, “. . . what I have called the truth of skepticism, that the human habitation of the world is not assured in what philosophy calls knowledge.”

Therefore, if knowledge—what we consider to be solidly factual—is undermined, we lose assurance of our place in the world, our existence. If the knowledge of our father is discredited, our lives—to use Shapiro’s word—“crumble” through the loss of connection to something substantial outside ourselves. Cavell puts it this way:

A metaphysically desperate degree of private bonding, of the wish to become undispossessable, would seem to be an effort to overcome the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him, but doubtful at the same time whether there is any place to which he really belongs.

We don’t know where we belong and have to start from scratch to discover something to hold onto and affirm our identity.

Parental Divinity

Much more often than not, when we are young children, reaching the state of cogency, we consider our parents to be god-like figures who know and control, beings who will nurture and guide us, whom we can turn to for comfort when in distress. If not exactly worship, we regard parents with a kind of reverence. Even when we come to know their limitations, flaws, and failures, for most of us vestiges of that early-stage relationship linger at our core.

Jean Piaget, in *Child's Conception of the World*, posits that "The child in extreme youth is driven to endow its parents with all of those attributes which theological doctrines assign to their divinities—sanctity, supreme power, omniscience, eternity, and even ubiquity."

Cavell considers our notions of God as an antidote to skepticism, a basis of a kind of certainty that allows us to feel at home in the universe: "In Cartesian epistemology God assures the general matching of the world with human ideas of it by preserving it, its matching and its existence; in Lockean society God assures our general human claims to possession and dominion of the world by having given it to us." This notion of a divinity who created a world that embraces human needs offers great comfort. Disbelief threatens psychic upheaval.

That's why emerging doubts about parental powers can undermine the child's entire existence. Piaget cites his colleague Pierre Bovet's quotation of Edmund Gosse's reaction when Gosse first heard his father say something he knew was not true:

Here was the appalling discovery, never suspected before, that my Father was not as God, and did not know everything. The shock was not caused by any suspicion that he was not telling the truth but by the awful proof that he was not as I had supposed omniscient.

As a result, the loss of God or the certainty of God is a source of great doubt about our place in the world and our connection with everything that is outside us. Cavell writes:

But Descartes's very clarity about the necessity of God's assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between our everyday judgments and the world (however the matter may stand in natural science) means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken.

If Gosse considers his father's flaw an appalling discovery, how much worse to learn that the man you had always considered to be your father was, in fact, not the man who had given you life and a firm place in the scheme of things?

Even if Shapiro did not consider her father a deity, she enjoyed years of devotion to him and to his memory after he was killed in a car crash. When a DNA test shattered her assurance in his paternity, her everyday crumbled. Cavell reached such a conclusion about the vulnerability of the everyday through a philosophy of skepticism, Shapiro—like my friend—through a personal crisis that obliterated long-believed knowledge.

Discovering the Biological Father

My friend knows little more of her deceased biological father than a name, a photograph, and some few details of his life and work. She still has not come to terms with her origins. Fortunately for Shapiro she was able to know and meet the man who had donated his sperm as a young medical student, now a retired physician she calls Ben Walden. They communicated and interacted personally, coming to like one another, Shapiro even befriending his daughter.

Shapiro, in her search, enjoyed many advantages the vast majority of people lack. She is a prominent writer, married to a successful journalist and filmmaker with exceptional

research skills, connected to many people who can offer information and strategies, in possession of the credentials that allow her to gain access to physicians and theologians. She is successful and appealing. Privileged. Ben Walden and others in his family read several of her books. Clearly, she is a daughter any man could be proud of.

Yet her many attributes, as much as they helped Shapiro cope, did not shield her from the traumas of her origins. They did not answer the existential question of, Who am I? Really?

Never Knowing the Biological Father

Literally knowing her biological father makes Shapiro unique in comparison to the thousands of humans conceived through artificial insemination unlikely to ever know. Many, however, are trying. Today breaking anonymity and revealing the identify of sperm donors has become a complex legal, ethical, and medical issue, exacerbated by the emergence of DNA testing and the resistance of donors and sperm banks.

But beyond those aware of the mystery of their biological origins, there may be many thousands more who will never know the man they assume to be their father is not the man who engendered them.

Steve Olsen, whose article titled "Who's Your Daddy?" that appeared in *The Atlantic*, suggests, "Widespread genetic testing could reveal many uncomfortable details about what went on in our parents' and grandparents' bedrooms."

Speculation on how many people don't know their real father varies. Olsen writes, "In graduate school, genetics students typically are taught that 5 to 15 percent of the men on birth certificates are not the biological fathers of their children." Russ Kirk, in a 2011 posting, cites biologist Robin Barker, who reports in his book *Sperm Ward: The Science of Sex* that the percentage of surprise fathers ranges according to geography and economic status: "Actual figures range from 1

percent in high-status areas of the United States and Switzerland, to 5 to 6 percent for moderate-status males in the United States and Great Britain, to 10 to 30 percent for lower-status males in the United States, Great Britain and France.”

Embracing Uncertainty

While fortunate to be aware of both her social and biological fathers, Shapiro still struggled with questions of identity. Ultimately, she turns to the philosophical as an antidote to the psychological, ironically embracing a version of Cavell’s skepticism as the best solution to her dilemma.

She tells of receiving in an email from her biological half sister a passage from the work of Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist teacher and writer. “To be fully alive, fully human, and completely awake is to be continually thrown out of the nest. To live fully is to be always in no-man’s-land.” These words come as yet another revelation, an answer that makes her particular dilemma just one extreme manifestation of the general human condition.

I had felt every day since the previous June that I now lived—exiled, forever wandering—in no-man’s-land. But the truth was that this had always been the case. Any thought of solid ground was nothing more than an illusion—not only for me but for all of us. Those words: Completely awake. Live fully, sent to me by the half sister I had never known. I had strived for those states of being all my life, while a part of me slumbered. We will have been like dreamers. Now there would be no more slumber. You will be set free.

Days later, recalling Keats’ notion of negative capability and the embracing of uncertainty, she experiences a further insight. “In this direction lay freedom, and, paradoxically, self-knowledge. By my being willing not to know thoroughly who I am and where I come from, the rigid structures surrounding

my identity might begin to give way, leaving behind a sense of openness and possibility.”

Many of the decisions people must constantly make through the days of their existence disturb the comfort of the nest, forcing them to live in a no-man’s-land of ephemeral existence while they crave the certainty of an essence.

Most of those distraught over the uncertainties of their origin, however, lack Shapiro’s intellectual and emotional resources. They are desperate to know their fathers and all the comforting certainties they want to believe that entails. My friend, while not as accepting of her circumstances as Shapiro, has—I believe—overcome the initial shock of the revelation. Possessing her own creative intelligence, after seeking more information about her biological ancestry, she has moved on, recognizing that she has become the person she is regardless of the sperm that engendered her. Yet, despite that degree of certainty, the deception gnaws.

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The Iliad: A Poem of Force and Pity



Every fall I read the first stanza of the *Iliad* out loud to my students: “Sing, Goddess, the Anger of Peleus’ son Achilles / and its devastation...” (*Iliad* I:1-2)[\[1\]](#). I ask them what the poem is about and eventually someone states the obvious: Achilles’ anger. Then I ask how the poem ends. Someone says with a horse. He’s wrong. In fact, most the memorable cultural highlights from the Trojan war—the abduction of Helen, the Trojan Horse, the Death of Achilles—never show up in the *Iliad*. Even more discouraging, no glorious gains. King Arthur gets Camelot, Beowulf saves Heorot hall, Aeneas gets Rome. What does Achilles get? He gets angry, mourns his dead friend,

and then brutally kills a lot of Trojans. As far as a war story goes, the *Iliad* is a killjoy.

What makes the *Iliad* a great war epic then? Why is it folklore that Alexander the Great, one of the greatest military conquerors of the Western world, slept with the *Iliad* (in scroll form, mind you) under his pillow so that he might fight as the reincarnation of Achilles? Why is Achilles remembered as the great warrior who won glory at Troy? To me, the gainless brutality and relentless sorrow written about in the *Iliad* doesn't reaffirm the glory gained in war but squashes it. And this is, as far as I can tell, what we get from the first great war epic: the demystification of the glories of war and the tragic delusion of Force.

In her famous essay *The Iliad, or, The Poem of Force*, Simone Weil says the true hero of the *Iliad* is Force. By Force she means, "It is the x that turns anybody who is subject to it, into a thing...Somebody was here, now nobody is here at all." The Force on display in the *Iliad* is not the mechanized and industrialized warfare we know. Instead, it is spears and swords ripping and puncturing flesh, vividly. Here is an example:

"Hippolochos sprang away, but Agamemnon killed him dismounted, cutting away his arms with a sword-stroke, free of the shoulder, and sent him spinning, like a log, down the battle." (*Iliad* XI: 145-147)

The *Iliad* is chalk full of gruesome descriptions of bronze cutting limbs and shattering bone. This stuff may just be an example of something like a Tarantino e.g., *Kill Bill* or *Django* fascination with graphic human carnage. Or a Mel Gibson war movie interested in giving the most brutal war examples on record. Gahw! Look at all that blood! In some ways, I think Homer is interested in the gruesome spectacle of Bronze Age combat. But, unlike Tarantino and Gibson, Homeric death scenes

are especially visceral for the audience because the warrior getting gutted is a man with a name, a lineage, and a history. He's not just an anonymous human body—or whole group of bodies—exhibited to bleed and die. There are no anonymous deaths in the *Iliad*. Every death is particular. Although the individual warriors may reduce each other to objects, Homer refuses. Here he tells of a pair of brothers, one of whom will shortly die:

“There was a man of the Trojans, Dares, blameless and bountiful,
a priest consecrated to Hephaistos, and he had two sons,
Phegus and Idaios, well skilled both in fighting.
These two breaking from the ranks of the others charged
against Diomedes”

(*Iliad* V: 9-12)

These young men enter under the contract of Force, and Phegus dies in the dust only a few lines after we learn who he is. Someone has become nothing. Although the Force of combat destroys young men, Homer resists the Force by reminding us of a man's identity before he is slain. Still, Force in war takes individuals and turns them into dust. There is only death, and this is most clearly seen in the waring rage of Achilles, the incarnation of war.

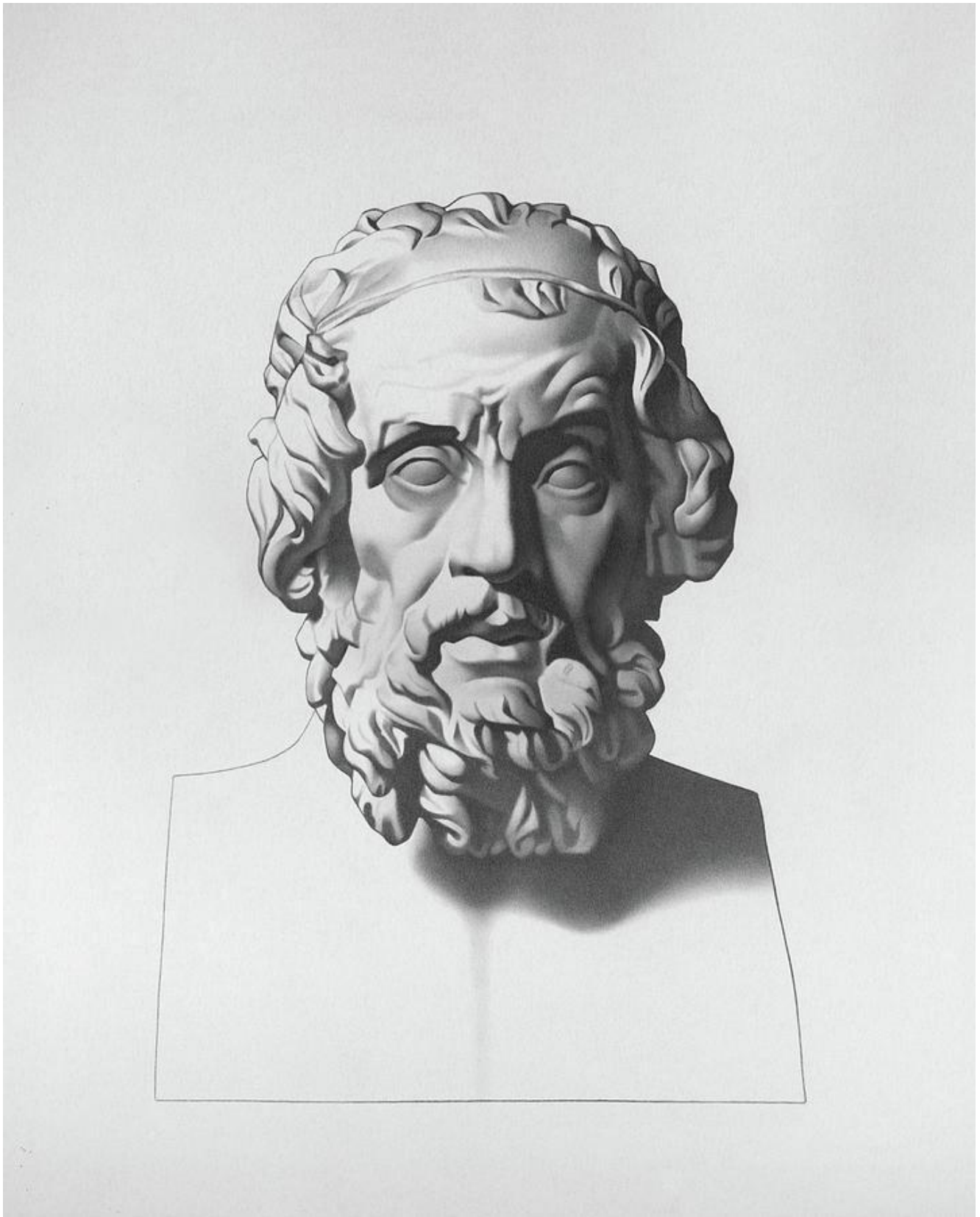
Achilles is the ultimate weapon. As one of my students said, he is like a nuclear weapon released on the Trojans. He kills without pity or discrimination. Here is Homer's description:

“As inhuman fire sweeps on in fury through the deep angles
of a drywood mountain and sets ablaze the depth of the timber
and the blustering wind lashes the flame along, so Achilles
swept everywhere with his spear like something more than a
mortal
harrying them as they died, and the black earth ran blood.”
(XX: 490-494)

As you read about Achilles' exploits, you can hear Oppenheimer saying, "I am become death, destroyer of worlds." As an incarnation of war, Achilles demands ultimate, sweeping annihilation. Three chapters of killing culminate in the death of Hector, the prince and protector of Troy. Achilles attaches Hector's limp body to the back of his chariot and drags the body around the walls of Troy for his family to witness.

"A cloud of dust rose where Hektor was dragged, his dark hair was falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled in the dust; since by this time Zeus had given him over to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers. So all his head was dragged in the dust; and now his mother tore out her hair...and his father beloved groaned pitifully."
(XXII 401-407)

This iconic disgracing of Hektor's body intentionally furthers the sorrow of Hector's surviving family members. It does little for Achilles. After all the Force Achilles brings against the Trojans, he is still angry. This destruction has brought him no respite, and he cannot fill the void in his heart that was caused by the death of his friend, Patroklos. As Weil writes: "Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims: the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates." Achilles subjugates a slew of Trojans to the equation of Force, and in doing so he loses all sense of pity for other human beings. Ironically, pity turns out to be the one thing Homer thinks can lessen a small portion of Achilles' suffering.



This is the truth that Achilles swallows at the end of the poem. Force only brings more sorrow, and this does nothing to quell his own sorrow. Force exacerbates sorrow and can never end it. The *Iliad* is not an anti-war story as we might conceive it with a clear moral lesson about the sorrows of war. I don't think Homer thought he could end war, just like

he couldn't stop floods or forest fires. But, by putting violence and sorrow on display in the way Homer does, he saps war of its glorious claim and forces the reader of the poem to witness a mother and father in despair.

Life in war is suffering, Achilles tells Priam at the end of the poem. Weil, in a terrible historical predicament herself (born Jewish and living in Nazi occupied France) also echoes Achilles' sad realization. "Perhaps all men, by the very act of being born, are destined to suffer violence; yet this is a truth to which circumstance shuts men's eyes. The strong are never absolutely strong and the weak are never absolutely weak, but neither is aware of this. They have in common a refusal to believe that they belong to the same species." Perhaps humans can't end violence, but they can transcend the dictates of Force and be godlike in lessening this sorrow. This is the change Achilles bears witness to at the end of the poem. When Priam enters Achilles' tent to ask for Hector's body back, Priam grabs Achilles' knees and begins his plea:

"'Achilles like the gods, remember your father, one who is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age...' (XXIV: 486-7)

Confronted by Priam, Achilles then sees his own lonely father in Priam's face, and returns the body of Hector to the Trojans. Achilles forgives his enemy and discovers pity.

The more I read the *Iliad*, the more I am convinced that the poem does not glorify war in any meaningful way. Instead, the poem exposes us to gratuitous pain, destruction, and suffering. The poem is not epically cool; it is epically sad. In this, the *Iliad* sets a precedent by telling a war story with all the gore but no glory. It points out the sadness and vanity of the endeavor. This precedent of overwhelming sadness continues in many of the other great war novels of Western literature. Books like *Red Badge of Courage*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *The Things They Carried* are common in our

high schools and challenge the idea of glory in war. Glory and military virtue are not the main subject of many of the war novels we, as a culture (or at least high school teachers), consider great. Is a great war novel primarily an anti-war book then? Not necessarily. For me, what makes the *Iliad* a war-epic is that it can help us rediscover, or even reimagine, a part of our humanity. This is what we see in Achilles at the end of the poem.

Achilles learns through his own sadness how to become a human that extends pity even to his enemy. In doing so, he rejects his god-given power that subjugates those weaker than him to Force. I see this as heroic. Achilles shows moral imagination by going beyond the glory of his warrior culture, relieving the sorrows of war, rather than exacerbating them. By the end, Achilles understands the limits of Force and moves beyond those limits by practicing an empathetic kindness toward his enemy, Priam. Achilles only understands the limits and delusions of Force by living them out. Perhaps only a powerful man like Achilles can show us this because he has the full control of Force at his fingertips. In the end, Homer has Achilles use his power to heal a wound he created, and in doing so, he shows us what is meaningful about being part of the human species.

[\[1\]](#) All quotes are from Lattimore's translation of *The Iliad*