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ARTYKUŁ ORYGINALNY / ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Virtuous Worldviews and Bottom-up Deliberation: Origins of Liberal Democracy in the **Iliad** and the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: The paper aims to trace hermeneutically some ideas that today are fundamental to the moral and political ethos of Western culture. This is done with a focus on the **Iliad** and on the Hebrew Bible, and its exegesis by the Talmudic rabbis. It is argued that combining ideas from both texts is key to overcoming the limitations inhering in each.

Humanism in the **Iliad** is manifested by the absence of any moral source of authority outside human cycles. This compels the heroes who face human finitudes and the limits of brute force to apply rational deliberation. The humanism in the Hebrew Bible is manifested by the endorsement of the material world as good and in the idea of Imago Dei which grants humans a special moral status as well as a promise of tracts of happiness and fulfillment that are non-predatory and non-exclusionist. The **Iliad** offers a formal element — deliberation; the Bible a substantive element — human dignity. Hence, Biblical virtues are chiefly about cultivating a habit of seeing material reality as good and approaching social and material reality in ways that preempt conflict, and about human goals that are socially and environmentally friendly.

The paper develops these ideas in light of Hobbes's notion of the **Leviathan** and the option for "bottom-up" politics as envisioned by John Rawls. The experience of war and the reverse relationship between non-violent deliberation and women's political power help understand both ancient and modern thought explored in the paper.

Keywords:

deliberation;
Hebrew Bible;
Homeric literature;
Iliad;
John Rawls;
Thomas Hobbes;
human dignity

This paper is dedicated to Ariel.

Introduction

The foundational moral tenets of our contemporary political life are respect for human dignity and political participation in decision making by means of free deliberation. Both are articulated in international human rights covenants and national constitutions. Respect for human dignity is a substantive value (or set of values), as it is about human nature and the norms that follow. Political participation is a formal value, because it is about procedures of decision-making, not their content.

In this article, I wish to dig up the origins of these tenets in the most ancient influential texts of Western culture — The **Iliad** and the Hebrew Bible. I wish to illustrate how political and moral paradigms of early cultures already contain the logic and insights of contemporary moral values. Discussion will revolve around a key theme: the possibility of bottom-up peaceful deliberation as an alternative to the Hobbesian model of "war of all against all" that can only be terminated by coercive top-bottom processes (i.e., a "Leviathan"). I will show how the Western tradition has developed an ethos of bottom-up peaceful processes of legitimization, which promote Biblical moral values. This involves individuals negotiating their way toward a morally and materially fulfilling existence. These deliberations are informed by a diversity of traditions, and yet, are not committed to particular religions and ideologies.

Because I am concerned with modes of thinking, I read Homer and the Bible as holistic texts, ignoring their complex philological evolutions. I am exploring the texts as unified narratives. [1] Werner Jaeger contends that "the poem [**Iliad**] is built on one single ethical plan". [2] Far from being competent to judge this claim, I ask in this paper what insights may be drawn if we seek to read the poem as having such

[1] See for example Richard Elliott Friedman, **The Disappearance of God: A Divine Mystery**, Little Brown, Boston 1995; Jasper Griffin, **Homer on Life and Death**, *Clarendon Press Paperbacks*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1983.

[2] Werner Jaeger, **Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture**, 2nd ed., Vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1946, p. 48.

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an ethical plan. Both the **Iliad** and the Bible will be explored as generative narratives for future democratic values. Shulamit Almug traced the Homeric narratives in relation to two related formal practices: trial by the rule of law and performative dialogues. [3] I will focus on deliberation as an interpersonal mode of creating social institutions and resolving conflicts. I will argue, paradoxically, that precisely within a text whose overt values are war for the sake of glory, do we find the origins of non-violence and rational deliberation, and that the foundational text of the "religion of the law" hides an ethos of virtue, different from the virtue ethics of classical philosophy.

The **Iliad** and the Bible are quite different, in content, genre, and historical settings. Whereas the Homeric poems originate in a world often referred to as "pre-political", the backdrop to the Biblical stories is that of large, authoritarian empires; the Homeric actors live and act in their given cultural values, mainly honor through excellence; the Bible is a story about the formation of a cultural and political revolution, albeit, limited to a small nation. For the Homeric bard, the Greek gods are human-like actors with some supernatural powers and little moral pretense. They often behave more foolishly and incontinently than humans (e.g., Hera distracting Zeus, **Iliad**, Book 14). The storytelling within Homeric literature adopts an all-knowing but morally neutral perspective. The narrator of the Hebrew Bible represents God's omnipotent and judgmental point of view.

War is key to our exploration. All humans are social creatures who recognize each other as persons with emotions, thoughts, and desires. They prefer peaceful, non-coercive solutions to fighting. [4] But over 90% of known human societies are engaged in warfare and suffer from internal violence. [5] War pushes human efforts and endurance to the extreme. In war, people choose to face death, reaching a point in which the value of survival and all other values call for justification. [6]

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[3] See Shulamit Almog, "From the Odyssey Onwards: Law's Long and Winding Road", *Law & Literature* 2020, Vol. 32, No. 1, pp. 47–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/1535685X.2019.1613092.

[4] See Donald E. Brown, **Human Universals**, McGraw-Hill, New York 1991.

[5] See Lawrence H. Keeley, **War Before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996.

[6] On the other hand, if we dismiss the threat of war altogether and adopt pacifism, we risk the emergence of a violent free rider who will exploit this vulnerability. Preparedness and psychological readiness to self-defense are key to peace too. See Gregory S. Kavka, "Some Paradoxes of Deterrence", *Journal of Philosophy* 1978, Vol. 75, No. 6, pp. 285–302, https://doi.org/10.2307/2025707.

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The first part of this article focuses on the **Iliad**, whose setting is war in a warriors' culture. The second part reads the Hebrew Bible. The Bible endorses religiously sanctioned violence, while underscoring the inherent value of human life. This invites a reading about the Biblical insights into the secular motivations of war, the chief of which are meagre vital resources, fear of attack motivated by meagre vital resources, and honor. [7] The third part will discuss the erosion of the Biblical ethos, how Biblical heroes fail to live up to its foundational values. The fourth part will explore why the conclusion of the **Iliad** leads to Hobbes's pessimism about human deliberation. The fifth part will discuss the hope invested in contemporary thinking in planting the Biblical substantive seed in the Homeric formal soil.

The origins of deliberation and the collapse of value

The overarching narrative in the **Iliad** is about the kidnapping or elopement of a woman, which sets off a grand war, lasting ten years. The opening episode is a bitter debate between two warlords on the possession of a woman, taken as a prize after slaughtering her husband and three brothers in front of her eyes (**Iliad**, Book 19:291ff.). In a saga suffused with fighting and violence, the very first scene is a step down from violence. Achilles and Agamemnon do not fight physically over the woman; they argue by all sorts of rhetoric. [8] They use foul and abusive language too. But they do not resort to physical violence. Considering their identity as warriors, the absence of power or authority to restrain them, and Achilles's boiling wrath, this is a surprising outcome.

The Greeks had tried to avoid violence prior to a direct clash with the Trojans. They sent an embassy to claim Helen back (**Iliad**, Book 3:203) and later offered a duel to resolve the conflict with less bloodshed. It did not work. Full-scale violence prevailed and the Greeks sacked Troy. The assembly which decided that Agamemnon should return his war prize, Chryseis, terminated the plague. Then,

[7] See Thucydides, **The Peloponnesian Wars** 1.23; Thomas Hobbes, **Leviathan**, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, Ch. 13; Azar Gat, **War in Human Civilization**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, Ch. 3.

[8] See Baukje van den Berg, **Homer the Rhetorician: Eustathios of Thessalonike on the Composition of the Iliad**, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022.

Agamemnon laid claim to Achilles's war prize girl, Briseis. It is not a public issue like the plague; they are facing each other to settle this post-assembly dispute. [9]

I suggest that the bigger story is the contrast between the failed embassy to Troy and the failed discussion between Agamemnon and Achilles. It is the tension between the ostensibly main plot (the Trojan war) and the side plot (the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles). Both plots are about the possession of a captured woman. Scholars point out that Achilles struggles with the limits of language and communication. [10] Despite his rage, the exhaustion of deliberation does not lead to violence. Achilles's strategy is to count on the violence of others doing the fighting; he wants his fellowmen to die in battle and be defeated so they call him back to fight. He has not converted to pacifism. But the seed of non-violence is there. It fails to bud though. Achilles's non-violence is the nihilism that results from the diversity of violent causes in the heroic culture, which offers no unified ultimate concerns. Achilles has no way to balance his commitment to holding his war-prize, his commitment to his own honor in the face of the Greeks, and his commitment to the expedition against Troy. When a new emotion enters into play, the balance tips toward cooperation with Agamemnon and violence against Troy. There is no hierarchy of values here, merely the balance of emotional vectors operating at the moment. This is how Hobbes describes Achilles's rage and human nature. [11]

Summarizing **Iliad's** first book, Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel over a woman. They are engaged in moral deliberation on issues of justice ("I will give

[9] The **Iliad** comes to closure with fruitful interpersonal deliberation, in which once more Achilles is requested to hand over a body in his possession, which is a mark of glory. Humility and emotion seem to make this happen. See **Iliad**, Book 24:560ff.

[10] See Adam Parry, "The Language of Achilles", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 1956, Vol. 87, pp. 1–7; Oliver Taplin, **Homeric Sounding: The Shaping of The Iliad**, Clarendon, Oxford 1992.

[11] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 23. Paradoxically, Hobbes believes that it is impossible to persuade people rationally that there are liberal alternatives to fighting, but he also believes that it is possible to persuade people that the only way to avoid "war of all against all" is by giving up on rational persuasion and by joint submission to tyranny (see Bryan Garsten, **Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2006; David Johnston, **The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation**, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1986). It is as if free rational deliberation can only lead to its own suicide.

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her up if you find me another prize"; "we cannot disallow the awards that have been given"). The exchange involves moral criticism too (you are "covetous beyond all mankind"). However, failing to resolve this through persuasion, Achilles gives up on his war prize, and on fighting too. Achilles resorts to sophisticated rhetoric, verbal insults, and to prayer for bloodshed. When words fail, he opts for retreat, not war. The godlike rage afflicting Achilles (*menis*) does not produce violence, but first discussion, then retreat. There is neither closure, nor violence.

Whereas the Biblical narrative invokes God's intervention to show clearly who is right and who is wrong (e.g., Numbers 16:32), the multiplicity and diversity of the Hellenic gods allow neither the actors in the **Iliad**, nor the audience to take moral lessons from divine interventions. In the absence of a greater authority, the Greek warlords (the "*basileis*") may fear coming at each other; they are in Hobbes' "natural condition of mankind". [12] But there is neither **Leviathan** nor any social contract on the horizon, nor one almighty God. If they do not wish to fight with each other all the time, they have no choice but to deliberate, to establish councils and to try out rational arguments. The epic contains at least ten formal deliberations. They are tainted by foul language and dubious methods of arbitration. Most fail. The Hebrew Bible contains none. [13]

The world of the **Iliad** is notable for its humanism. It is not substantive humanism. It is not about the flourishing of every human being in peace and liberty. Nor is it humanism of dominion over self and nature. It is about a different kind of humanism — a world in which there is no moral or political authority beyond a group dynamic of human individuals, none of whom has the power to dictate joint action by physical force; none can survive better by annihilating the others. They must rely on their own devices to resolve conflicts and continue cooperation.

[12] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 13.

[13] Moses resorted to an echelon of judges and constables (Exodus 18; Numbers 11:16–17). In one place, an elder presents his case to a council of elders and receives their blessing (Ruth 4:9–12). There is no evidence of joint discussion among peers regarding a practical decision. Interestingly, the one episode of arguing a case before the elders is about the legitimacy of marrying a foreign woman and the continuity of God's blessing to the Patriarchs. In the Homeric corpus too, deliberation seeks consensus and shared emotions, rather than joint decision making from a plurality of opinions. See David F. Elmer, **The Poetics of Consent: Collective Decision Making and the Iliad**, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2013, p. 198.

Achilles's non-violent retreat takes place while heavy battles rage outside (**Iliad**, Books 11–18). In a war that lasted ten years, his days of self-isolation are negligible; but they take the greater part of the **Iliad**. While in retreat, Achilles has a moment of aporia — a mental step outside ordinary mentality that is open to radical doubt. Achilles will question whether his highest values are achievable, and whether they are worth achieving. It is a moment of disorientation which is an opportunity to revise ultimate values. [14] In the language of twentieth-century philosophy, it is a transition from pursuit of first-order desires to reflection on second-order desires. [15] The loosening of one's grip on first order desires is a fragile moment in which the person may lose identification with any desire or value. His "core identity" goes into suspension. Awareness of the fragility of every desire and value may be a starting point of a moral revolution. It is an apt opportunity to question the Trojan war, the role of captured women in society's scale of honor, even the value of glory.

The heroes of the **Iliad** kill by the dozens; Achilles kills the most. In the Book of Genesis, the heroes do not kill in battle. Abraham is the only man who fights in the Biblical war most similar to the Trojan war. He wins. Yet the text refrains from explicitly saying that he slaughtered somebody. He refuses the prizes of war. He acts as a king in a coalition of kings (or: warlords), but he sets himself apart from the culture of marauding. He did well herding cattle before the war and could manage well without its booty (Genesis 14). Interestingly, with all his admirable moral fortitude, Abraham never deliberates with a human peer. His only moral dialogue is with God (Genesis 18:17–33). From our perspective, Achilles is far behind Abraham in terms of personal moral virtues. But Achilles's humanism gives him something Abraham does not have — the capacity to doubt all value and to reflect about it verbally, creatively, and courageously with his peers.

Initially, Abraham is led by his father, having an ordinary, traditional life. His own story begins with hearing God's directive to leave his country of birth and his father's home (Genesis 11:26–32). The Hebraic moral revolution is "top down"; Achilles's transient and minor revolution is "bottom-up", beginning with human goals and practices. There is no moral God ordering Achilles to either kill or de-

[14] See Bernard Reginster, **The Affirmation of Life: Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 26.

[15] See Harry G. Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person", *Journal of Philosophy* 1971, Vol. 68, No. 1, pp. 5–20, http://doi.org/10.2307/2024717.

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sist. Abraham finds exactly this kind of God; he is ready to sacrifice his own son following God's order; it is only God's voice that will stop him from doing so. Abraham is the father of top-down order of life and death. The Homeric heroes know their ultimate destiny; but there is nobody to inform them about morals. Abraham and the Biblical heroes exercise "natural morality". However, they live in the constant presence of a God who may tell them to break human moral taboos.

Aristotle writes that even though incontinent (non-virtuous) persons might use instrumental reason (i.e., employ logical thinking to achieve goals), they cannot conduct "good deliberation" (*euboulia*). [16] In his discussions of Achilles, Aristotle mentions his fiery rage, but avoids classifying him as an incontinent brute. I wish to point out that even though Achilles fails to revise his values by means of deliberation, his inchoate "bottom-up" approach might have heralded the idea that base and brute people may be able to gradually develop through joint rational reflection. [17]

Richard Martin argues that Achilles's language is unique for its forays beyond formulaic articulation to dismantle and redefine heroic culture. Achilles shifts valuation from worldly war prizes to moral goods such as integrity and truthfulness. [18] Achilles gets closer to the Biblical ethos by declaring that human life is beyond pecuniary valuation (**Iliad**, Book 9:401–409). [19] In his *aporia* Achilles wavers

[16] Aristotle, **Nicomachean Ethics**, 1142b.

[17] See Arthur W.H. Adkins, **Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values**, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1960, pp. 172–190. I do not enter here the discussion about the extent deliberation of ultimate ends depends on a moral community or "well-ordered society" (see Henry S. Richardson, **Practical Reasoning about Final Ends**, *Cambridge Studies in Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1994).

[18] See Richard P. Martin, **The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1989, Ch. 4.

Martin also portrays the Homeric dialogues as fighting with words to achieve mastery. Feminist scholars render Homeric dialogues between a man and a woman along lines of power inequality. See for example Deborah Lyons, **Dangerous Gifts: Gender and Exchange in Ancient Greece**, University of Texas Press, Austin 2012. In this paper I will trace the evolution of a different kind of dialogue between the genders as key to a moral ethos of equality and non-dominance.

[19] See Moshe Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law", in: Menahem Haran (ed.), **Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume; Studies in Bible and Jewish Religion Dedicated to Yehezkel Kaufmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday**, Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1960, pp. 5–28.

between the value of life, which is ephemeral (*nostos*) and the value of fame (*kleos*), which is abstract, but eternal (**Iliad**, Book 9:410 v. 18:97).

For the ancients, life was always precarious, as it was besieged by suffering, sudden and incurable diseases, brigandage, and many other forms of premature death. In those days, life expectancy at birth was less than thirty. [20] Working-class adults were shorter in stature and suffered from shorter life expectancy relative to the noble and leisure classes. [21] For people like Achilles, the risk of early and painful natural death loomed large over the decision to risk life in battle. If the warrior class lives longer and better, its values may be compatible with respect for life. And why care about life anyhow? This is Apollo's logic. Being immortal, he need not weigh the risk of death in battle against other forms of death:

> Lord of the earthquake, you would have no respect for me if I were to fight you about a pack of miserable mortals, who come out like leaves in summer and eat the fruit of the field, and presently fall lifeless to the ground. Let us stay this fighting at once and let them settle it among themselves. (**Iliad**, Book 21:462–466).

Something new might arise from this pitiful existential abandonment, in which humans cannot help but settle issues among themselves, without recourse to divinity, revelation or external power.

The ethos of the Hebrew Bible

The Pentateuch is considered the foundational text of the religion of the law. However, the Book of Genesis and much of the second book, Exodus, do not prescribe laws, but tell stories. I will argue that these stories are keys to a Biblical virtue ethics and that the foundational biblical virtues are not chosen and cultivated habits of behavior as we know from Aristotle, but cultivated and chosen habits of reality assessment. This line of thinking goes against philosophers who

[20] This is quite suppressed in the **Iliad**. Priam claims to have sired fifty sons, all killed in war. In the Bible too, natural death is set aside, as if homicide is the predominant threat to life.

[21] See John Lawrence Angell, **The People of Lerna: Analysis of a Prehistoric Aegean Population**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971; Robert Sallares, **The Ecology of Ancient Greek World**, *British History in Perspective*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1991; Ian Morris, **Burial and Ancient Society: The Rise of The Greek City State**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004.

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believe that values are "fact-insensitive". [22] Rather, **the Bible regards certain modes of factual judgments as virtuous and key to moral conduct**.

Karl Marx maintained similarly that Hume's distinction between fact and value is illusory because unjust realities distort the way humans perceive the facts and the values they subscribe to. [23] Marx thinks that the correction of social structures is a precondition to having the facts right. The Hebrew Bible does not share Marx's claim that the experience of a certain social class is a prerequisite for the virtuous construction of reality. In the Biblical and rabbinic literature, everybody — rich or poor — can cultivate a virtuous worldview. Every social class might face its own biases and challenges on the way. However, the Bible addresses everybody, insisting that all can share some basic views and values.

The Hebrew Bible begins with the affirmation that the creation is good, and the creation of humans is "very good" (Genesis 1:31). **The Hebrew Bible is the only major source from the axial age, whose first and foundational value judgment is that the material world is good. Nothing in the creation is "bad"**. Loneliness is deemed "not good" (Genesis 2:18), and it was immediately fixed. Biblical supernatural characters such as angels and Satan do not feature in the creation story and are never labeled as either good or bad. **There is a sense in which the Hebrew Bible is wholly materialistic and wholly positive**, as it represents the material world known to humans as a unity which is overall good.

The creation in God's Image expands the valuation of life beyond its biological dimensions. The good human life is a life of freedom, of domination over natural resources, of rational expression, and of sexuality. [24] Hardship and agony come as punishment for transgression (Genesis 3:14–21). But the expulsion from Eden is not accompanied by a reversal of the overall positive valuation of life. Human existence was deemed "very good", even before placement in Eden, and remains so after the expulsion.

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[22] See G.A. Cohen, "Facts and Principles", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2003, Vol. 31, No. 3, pp. 211–245, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2003.00211.x.

[23] See Karl Marx, **The Poverty of Philosophy. Chapter Two: The Metaphysics of Political Economy**, https://tiny.pl/stj-q1n38 [20.06.2026].

[24] See Yechiel Michael Barilan, "Imago Dei", in: Walter Homolka, Rainer Kampling, Amy-Jill Levine, Christoph Markschies, Peter Schäfer, and Martin Thurner (eds.), **Encyclopedia of Jewish Christian Relations**, De Gruyter, Berlin 2023, https://doi.org/10.1515/ejcro.278.

The first war erupts between Cain and Abel, apparently due to jealousy or vanity. It occurred when no social classes, nations or religions existed. Political and material conditions could not play a role in this war. The Talmudic rabbis debate what Cain and Abel were fighting over:

> [According to one Rabbi], they said to each other, "let's divide the world". One took possession of all the real estate, the other of all the chattel. The chattel owner asked the landowner to give his clothes; the landowner told the chattel owner to fly and not use the land. Rabbi Joshua said, Cain and Abel divided the land and the chattels [each took half]. They were arguing on whose land the Temple would be built [...] Rabbi Hunna said, a twin sister was born with Abel. Cain said: "I take her because I am the first born". Abel said: "I take her because she was born with me". (Genesis Rabbah 22:7)

The rabbis reiterate the causes of war. According to Rabbi Joshua, it is glory. According to Rabbi Hunna, it is scarce vital resources. The first anonymous rabbi invokes one of the two basic truths about human nature according to Hobbes. It is an infinite desire to know that the world is subordinated to one's own wishes:

> But know you not that men from their very birth, and naturally, scramble for every thing they covet, and would have all the world, if they could, to fear and obey them? [25]

Blaise Pascal describes the origins of human territoriality thus:

> "This dog is mine," said those poor children; "that is my place under the sun." Here is the beginning and the image of the usurpation of all the earth. [26]

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[25] William Molesworth, **The English Works of Thomas Hobbes**, Vol VII, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London 1845, p. 73 (*Decameron Physiologicum*). See also: Hobbes, **Leviathan…**, Ch. 11.

[26] Blaise Pascal, **Pensées**, Penguin, New York 1995, p. 34.

For comparison between Hobbes and Pascal, and between "war of all against all" versus the pre-political situation as a "madhouse", see Tyler Chamberlain, "Blaise Pascal as a Political Thinker: The Politics of the Knowledge of the Heart", Victoria 2013. A paper presented at the Canadian Political Science Association Conference (downloaded from academia.edu). For Achilles, the moment he meets a resisting force he cannot overcome with violence is also a moment in which he despairs from life, losing self-esteem and even sanity (**Iliad**, Book 21: 270ff.). Achilles's rage provokes war among the natural elements.

It is noteworthy that these depictions of human greed do not incorporate the effects of the debt economy. Without state regulation, entrepreneurs borrow to start an enterprise that would sustain them. Then, difficulties to service debt turn profit seeking into a survival effort that produces extreme measures of violence and abuse. This mechanism typifies the interaction between capital economy and warlordism. See, for example, Clifton Crais, **The Killing Age: How Violence Made the**

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The rabbis demonstrate the human capacity to turn every situation into a zero-sum game. This tendency involves three vices. First, there is a reality judgment about either scarce resources or an imminent attack by a neighbor who believes that resources are insufficient. Second, there is a failure to divide resources, as every side of the division tries to maximize power over its share. Third, failure of division leads to murder (rather than stalemate or migration). The Bible and the Talmudic rabbis tell us that this human tendency is independent of any social, political, or religious environment. It may happen in circumstances of oppression and huge inequalities, but also in an egalitarian and prosperous state of nature, like that of Cain and Abel.

The Patriarchs embody the virtues opposite to this vicious disposition. Even after God had promised the Land of Canaan to Abraham, Abraham invited Lot to choose his own share in a land that had never been promised to him. Moreover, even in a drought-prone land, giving away does not risk extinction, but forebodes prosperity (Genesis 13:5–16 and gloss Rashi on Genesis 13:7). Isaac adopts a similar strategy with the Philistines (Genesis 26), and Jacob in relation to Esau (Genesis, 27:43; Genesis 33) and Laban (Genesis 30).

The longest story in the Book of Genesis is dedicated to the rise of extractive tyranny. Joseph exploits Pharaoh's sensitivity to food to stir a panic of scarce resources (Genesis 41). The granary system, which the Bible attributes to Joseph, might have saved the lives of many, but at the price of slavery. The Biblical prescription for an alternative way of life is slavery to God, which means the exclusion of submission to human mastery (Exodus 7:16; Leviticus 25:55; Deut. 11:10–12).

In the Hebrew Bible, evil characters opt for aggression in fear of overconsumption, or in fear of being attacked by foes who believe that resources are scarce (e.g., Exodus 1:8–9; Numbers 22:4). Occasionally, one can find in the Bible the themes of women as war prizes and the king's free access to women (e.g., Genesis 20; Genesis 26; Numbers 31; Deuteronomy 21:1–14). [27] But these do not lead to wars.

Modern World, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2025, Ch. 4–5.

[27] The violent rejection of the Royal privilege to rape is at the heart of the foundation story of the Roman republic. For discussion of this theme from Livy and its impact on modern political thought see Harvey C. Mansfield, **The Rise and Fall of Rational Control: The History of Modern Political Philosophy**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2026, Ch. 1.

Lot offered his daughters as a ransom (Genesis 19:8). Soon after, these daughters are so shaken by the destruction of Sodom as to conclude that humanity was on the verge of extinction, and that the only solution was incest (Genesis 19:31–35). [28] These moments are reminiscent of Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter as the only chance to spare his family from rage and allow the Greeks to succeed in war. [29] In both cases, a person faces a dilemma between committing an abominable act and accepting a great loss to self and society. The moral question is whether it is permissible to do great harm when this is the only way to escape even greater harm. The epistemic question is whether great harm is indeed the only way out. Achilles's life is predestined by the prophecy that he must choose between fame and long life (**Iliad**, 9:497–510). The Bible does not pose such hard choices to its heroes. If they obey God, they may have both (Genesis 12:3).

The Hellenic sources explicate Agamemnon's dilemma as a moral moment calling into question the priority of values and other morally relevant issues such as the distinction between action and inaction, and personal virtues. Agamemnon does not question human sacrifice as the only way to get out of the situation; he accepts this reality judgment and, on that basis, he is tormented by a moral choice. The Bible does not recognize the existence of situations such as the Trolley dilemma. [30] Dilemmas of this sort are the fate of those escaping God (Jonah 1).

The Bible is rarely receptive to the human motivations to fight; but it promotes the idea that God can send His Chosen People to fight, kill, plunder and dis-

[28] The Biblical narrative is ironic. Amidst the city of vice, live two daughters, who are betrothed but still virgin. There is no pressure to consummate marriage. When subjected to a few hours of bullying and social pressure, Lot is ready to hand over both daughters for abuse. Soon after, the daughters are quick to arrive at two radical conclusions about the state of the world. First, they are convinced that they are the only surviving humans. Second, the only way to secure humanity's future is raping their father. They do not even contemplate discussing their worries and plans with him, the third surviving human; he did not bother to consult his daughters prior to offering them for the sexual pleasures of the mob. Lot does not try to cut down on losses by offering only one daughter first; his daughters act with similar rashness, trying to save humanity by both sleeping with him on the same night. They had a chance to deliberate; but, rather, the elder instructed the latter. Lot and his daughters fall into a miscalculation of risk that brings them both to break a taboo without delay and without restraint. There is a clear contrast between Abraham's attempt to save Sodom, and the daughters initiative to save humanity.

[29] See Euripides, **Iphigenia at Aulis**.

[30] See David Edmonds, **Would You Kill the Fat Man? The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us About Right and Wrong**, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2013.

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place. The Bible encourages its readers to question their perceptions of reality but not God's words. [31] The Patriarchs in the Bible do not perceive their reality as threatening, and they do not seek glory through war. They tend not to reciprocate aggression and cheating, but to dodge. In the Bible, evil characters find compelling reasons to initiate hostilities. Worse still are the Amalekites who maraud the vulnerable out of mere opportunism (Exodus 17:8-16). A descendant of the Amalekite is trying to make a case for a genocide against a people he deems "superfluous", without even the pretension of acting on future risk (Esther 3:8–9). [32] This person, Haman, embodies the extreme of human evil in the Bible. It is not merely his unsatiated hunger for power over others. Haman is fully aware of his good fortunes and yet he deems his life not worth living unless the one remaining person who does not prostrate in his honor be hanged immediately (Esther 5:13–14).

In conclusion, the first and most common kind of evil in the Bible comes from a distorted human perception of reality, from people who fail to behold the world as good and accommodating, unless they dominate or expel other humans. The second kind of evil is a desire to exercise power over others. This might be explained away in terms of the first kind of evil, as a necessity of deterrence, not as a primary desire for power for its own sake. The third kind of evil is opportunistic marauding of people whose life is not worth protecting. The fourth and most extreme kind of Biblical evil is embodied in a person who cannot be content unless he exercises power over everybody else, without exception or delay. In the Homeric corpus we find evil of the second and third kind. Haman is unique in the axial canons.

Through this story on Haman, the Bible shows that its description of the creation as good is promoted with full awareness that evil characters exist, and that

[31] Modernity brought a sub-genre of war in the name of absolute truths, thus combining Divine power with human pretensions to rationality. They are "wars in the name of universal truth". Some scholars, such as Carl Schmitt, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Isaiah Berlin highlight the intensification of dehumanization that has accompanied wars in the name of Enlightenment values. See David A. Bell, **The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It**, Houghton Mifflin, New York 2007, p. 14; Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, **Dialectics of Enlightenment**, *Cultural Memory in the Present*, Schocken, New York 1966, Ch. 1; Steven Lukes, **The Diversity of Morals**, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2025, p. 122.

[32] This is how Bernstein explicates "radical evil" (see Richard J. Bernstein, **Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation**, Polity, Oxford 2002).

the state can easily come to massacre its own subjects. Even in the face of extreme evil, the Bible does not recant its valuation of life and its expectation of good life for all. This universalization is key to equality of all humans. The Bible implies that if people see reality properly, there is no need to deliberate who should live and who should die, who should dominate and who must be subjected; who is a hero and who is a war prize; who is "useful" and who is discardable.

Animals reproduce many more offspring than eventually survive into adulthood. Rather, if every newborn animal survives, the ecosystem will collapse. Thus, loss of life, predation, and domination are integral to non-human life forms. There is no *a priori* reason to rule out such strategies for humans as well. This might have been the lifestyle of our hominid ancestors. I contend that **the shift from animality to humanity is manifested in the moral rejection of these strategies of survival, with the confidence that abandonment of survival strategies that sustain the whole flora and fauna is possible, even desirable for humans**. [33]

God's original blessing is even more ambitious. The heavenly bodies were blessed with dominion over the sky (Genesis 1:18), but they do not procreate. Animals were blessed to multiply, but not with dominion. Sea-creatures were blessed to multiply and to "fill up the water" (Genesis 1:22). Only humans were blessed with all three: dominion, procreation, and expansion all over their habitat. This poses the leading moral challenge from Biblical times until today: **how to multiply and expand without erosion of the environment and without one human dominating another**.

The ancients dreamt about abundance and peace. One such scene was forged on Achilles's shield (**Iliad** 18:490ff). [34] For the Bible, this is not a distant, imaginary utopia. This is the way the world was created. Unless humans spoil it. Despite this poor, nasty, brutish and short life, the expectation of non-predation, non-domination, and care for every single human life persists. The only conces-

[33] See Yechiel Michael Barilan, **Human Dignity, Human Rights, and Responsibility: The New Language of Bioethics and Biolaw**, MIT Press, Cambridge 2012.

[34] See Annette L. Giesecke, **The Epic City: Urbanism, Utopia, and the Garden in Ancient Greece and Rome**, *Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 21, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 31–41.

Interestingly, Judicial deliberation is at the center of the shield. See Almog, "From the Odyssey Onwards…", pp. 47–74.

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sion given to humans in the Bible is the permission to consume animals, thus, even more sharply demarcating the difference between those created in the Image of God, and other creatures which are disposable like raw material (Genesis 9:1–7). [35]

How is it possible to refrain from raiding a foreign tribe when your own clan is on the brink of starvation? The Hebrew Bible does not talk about the afterlife as justifying moral restraint even at the price of one's own life. It sticks to its *prima facie* endorsement of this life. Its message is that God will provide solutions, sometimes more naturally (e.g., Genesis 26); sometimes miraculously (e.g., Exodus 16). Sometimes no special solution is needed, only a little forbearance on behalf of the anxious and short-sighted humans (e.g., Lot's daughters, Genesis 19:30–38). [36] The Bible approves of human initiated violence in self-defense (e.g., Genesis 14); it approves of neither violence for the sake of securing resources nor for the sake of glory. The blessing of procreation does not call for the capture of women; rather, the Bible discourages exogamy and prohibits forced sex, even forced marriage.

As human history is unfolding in the Bible, miracles become rarer, until they disappear; God stops talking to humans. [37] They are left to their own devices to answer critical and interrelated questions: Are resources sufficient? Is an attack by an outsider imminent? Is civil war an impending risk? Are there peaceful alternatives to hostilities and to tyranny?

Whereas the Hellenic tradition developed human deliberation as the means to cope with such questions, the Hebrew Bible places its stakes on a positive attitude to life — that life is good, humans have dignity, co-existence is possible; and that other people blessed with procreation are not a threat.

The value of human dignity and the sacredness of human life yield the moral power to preempt killing for greed, glory, sexual satisfaction and wanton purposes. But if we believe that circumstances do not allow everybody to survive, then the inviolability of human life becomes irrelevant. It is anyhow about to be

[35] See Yechiel Michael Barilan, "The Vision of Vegetarianism and Peace: Rabbi Kook on the Ethical Treatment of Animals", *History of the Human Sciences* 2004, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 69–101, https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695104048073.

[36] A singular Talmudic paragraph depicts King David as a warlord seeking expansion to feed his growing people (Berakhot 3b).

[37] See Friedman, **The Disappearance of God...**

violated. Those who act as if survival is a zero-sum game among humans tend to accept the abuse and death of other humans as an inevitable necessity. If life is a choice whether to be a predator or a prey, one finds survival and dignity in the former, not the latter. In a similar vein, an appeal to natural human sympathy and justice would not help either. [38] If justice is a matter of rational choice, then the perception of reality predicates rational reasoning. [39] The "veil of ignorance" blinds one from knowing one's position in reality, but it does not solve the problem of constructing reality. The Hebrew Bible begins with an "original position". It does not tell us directly how to think from that stance, but it does tell us how to view it – as good, as accommodating to every human being. [40]

When Cain saw that God responded to Abel's sacrifice, his conclusion might have been that Grace was a positional good; only one can arrive first. [41] It might have been a premonition that equal division of resources was impossible. Only one should prevail. But Cain might have waited and might have found his offer accepted on another occasion. **The message from the story on Cain and Abel is that the problem of justice lies less in the system of distribution, but in the primary judgments of the reality in which distribution takes place**. It is possible to envision everyone sitting peacefully under their own vine and fig (Micah 4:3). It is logically impossible for everybody to meet the competitive goals of the heroic culture. Only the few can be classified as "best" relative to others. If one believes that God's grace is positional, one is likely to fight for the first place.

Friedrich Nietzsche, as many others, looked down upon the vision of "universal green-meadow of happiness of the herd". [42] So, to live by the Biblical vision is

[38] See Katrina Forrester, **In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy**, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2019, pp. 79–80.

[39] See John Rawls, **A Theory of Justice**, Belknap, Cambridge 1971, p. 16.

[40] For Rawls, reality is characterized by "moderate scarcity". He incorporated sexuality by describing the persons in the original position as "heads of families" (Rawls, **A Theory of Justice...**, pp. 127–128).

[41] According to Hobbes, winning in a competition is a primary human good; hence, the elimination of competition might erode the joys and meanings of life (Hobbes, **Leviathan…**, Ch. 11). However, this does not necessitate competition for survival. One may wonder about the relationship between competition as a social value and other elements of culture. For example, in American education, there is a strong emphasis on one's place in class, while in Europe, the presenting achievement is one's individual score. Thorstein Veblen highlighted the high material costs of social competition.

[42] Friedrich Nietzsche, **Beyond Good and Evil**, Grapevine Books, 2025, p. 49.

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to find in the green meadow myriad horizons of non-predatory, non-positional and still highly rewarding tracts for self-realization. It is to stick to such visions even in the face of difficulty and menace. Contra thinkers like Nietzsche, the Bible inspires confidence that its humanism does not stunt happiness, fulfillment and greatness. It disavows excellence in capturing women as war prizes, no doubt, but infinite other skills and achievements are open for human pursuit.

The Talmudic rabbis cultivated intellectual study and mystical explorations as the highest values. [43] In this rabbinic ethos the greatest honor does not require possession or domination. Rather, the spiritual and intellectual spheres are infinite and free, not leading to material conflicts. [44]

On their way, God instructs Israel to turn north towards Canaan, walking the borderline of Esau's territory without trespass (Deut. 2:2–9). The Talmudic rabbis employ a pun. In Hebrew, the root for north is the same for mysteries (*ts-f-n)*. They say:

> Israel said to God: you have blessed Esau "thou shalt live on your sword", and now you are telling us to go north. How can we escape? God answered: if you see he is trying to engage you [in battle] turn to the mysteries of Torah. (Deut. Rabbah 1:19).

If we behold the realms of intellect, art and spirit as a mere escape from violence, we miss its power to reclaim love for life and tenacity to survive, that have inspired broken bodies and oppressed souls. [45] The immersion in texts facilitates dissemination, absorption and transformation of information and ideas. It has the power to erode differences of physical power, mainly gender and age. It is the bedrock of rational deliberation and some ultimate human values.

The Talmudic culture did not grant women an equal parity with men. However, when the rabbis elevated to the highest level of importance excellences that

[43] See Daniel Boyarin, **Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man**, University of California Press, Berkeley 1997.

[44] The meaning of learning and its low material costs and footprints might change in the era of AI.

[45] See Primo Levi, **Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity**, Collier Books, New York 1958, pp. 99–105.

are gender neutral, they indicated the pathway trailing from treating women as helpless war prizes to full agency in society. [46]

The audacity of the Biblical vision lies in the incipient idea of *Imago Dei*. Drought, starvation and diseases were widespread; infant and maternal mortality high; piracy and oppression rampant. In these brutish conditions, the Bible prescribes reality judgments that bend towards optimism and generosity, and it reiterates the promise that such a non-violent tendency would bring forth worldly success without recourse to a Leviathan. [47] Rather, the Bible depicts absolutism as a dead end of murderous paranoia. **The Hebrew Bible does not promise existence beyond this life; but it rejects life-plans that place survival as the only basic value, as Hobbes does.**

It is now possible to reconstruct Biblical ethics in relation to human nature. It is the embrace of material life, prosperity, and procreation all the while rejecting four survival strategies found among all non-human life forms: predation, use of violence to procreate (i.e. rape), displacing other humans by means of overconsumption, and willingness to sacrifice as much life as possible for the sake of the survival of one's own gene pool. This rejection is neither withdrawal from nor devaluation of the material world but a genuine tract towards prosperity.

The Biblical vision has gained renewed attention recently. One notable example is the decline (but not demise) of Malthusianism and social Darwinism. A reality judgment of inevitable scarcity under population pressure paved the way to acceptance of the problem of recurrent famines as insoluble by human wisdom [48] and to ideologies that are based on the assumption that successful nations inevitably thrive on the demise of "decadent races". [49] In actuality, technological in-

[46] See Oded Galor, **The Journey of Humanity: The Origins of Wealth and Inequality**, The Bodley Head, London 2022, pp. 91–100; David S. Landes, **The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are so Rich and Some are so Poor**, Norton, New York 1998, pp. 412–413. See also, somehow differently: Ali A. Allawi, **The Crisis of Islamic Civilization**, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009, pp. 155–168.

[47] This reading is the opposite of Nelson's. Eric Nelson, **The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2010.

[48] See Charles E. Trevelyan, **The Irish Crisis**, Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, London 1848, pp. 147–148, 201.

[49] See English Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury's speech in Albert Hall, May 4th, 1898, in: Ian Chapman-Curry, "The Dying Nations of the World", Almost History 2024, August 28, https://tiny.pl/

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novation has shown that people can both thrive and increase in a less violent and predatory world. With political, economic, legal and technological innovations, famines and bread riots disappeared from Europe. [50] At the global level too, it has also been shown that political reform is key to the prevention of famine and its relief. [51]

The abundance of the last two centuries is no evidence that Malthus was wrong. The debate over whether humans are over-consuming the planet to extinction is still raging. [52] Undoubtedly, the earth cannot support an infinite number of humans consuming unlimited resources. Are we closer to the ecological environment at the time of Cain and Abel, in which resources infinitely outnumbered people, or to an impending doom? Even though such a question is factual and even though scientific tools and data have been improving, I contend that such questions are akin to Kantian antinomies, because they cannot be settled by human reasoning. They are about the unknown future, dependent on too many assumptions, and prone to bias. Hence, I contend that according to the Bible, the essence of virtue is to act in relation to others from a reality assessment that, within the bounds of reason, is the least alarmist and most amicable understanding of the given situation.

Especially challenging are questions of adversarial intention. When the harvest is plentiful, one is less inclined to worry about starvation (unless one is a Pharaoh); but it is difficult to mind-read a potential adversary. Maybe he is as radical as Haman? Once people are convinced that an "Other" is likely to kill them, the road is wide open to atrocities in the name of self-defense. If the Israelites were not hungry in Egypt, their master Egyptians surely were not. Nevertheless,

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[50] See John Bohstedt, **The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England 1550-1850**, *The History of Retailing and Consumption*, Routledge, London 2010.

[51] See Amartya Sen, **Poverty and Famine: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation**, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981.

[52] See Hannah Ritchie, "Who Would Have Won the Simon-Ehrlich Bet Over Different Decades, and What Do Long-term Prices Tell Us About Resource Scarcity?", *Our World in Data* 2025, January 6, https://tiny.pl/62vpsdkdq [20.06.2026]; Marian L. Tupy and Gale L. Pooley, **Superabundance: The Story of Population Growth, Innovation, and Human Flourishing on the Infinitely Bountiful Planet**, Cato Institute, Washington 2022; Paul Sabin, **The Bet: Paul Ehrlich, Julian Simon, and Our Gamble Over Earth's Future**, Yale University Press, New Haven 2013.

with a full stomach they were convinced that a minority ethnic group is a military threat, and that the reasonable solution is enslavement and murder (Exodus 1:10). Scott Straus pinpoints the initial and most powerful motivation that brought about the genocide in Rwanda:

> The desire to protect oneself and one's family — whether from outsiders or insiders — is a powerful motivation, one that should not be underestimated. [53]

The second factor in Straus's analysis is the power of the state, to legitimize, organize and underwrite killing on a large scale. [54] The Leviathan might go astray, and no power is left to restrain it. However, if paranoia persists, one can always justify state oppression as the only means to prevent worse outcomes.

This is the key weakness in Hobbes's theory. Even though the state is bound to provide "other contentment of life", [55] the prevention of the worst circumstances of existence is its source of legitimization. If you believe resources are scarce, that potential adversaries are likely to attack, and that the only way out is state oppression, one's perception of reality justifies everything but the worst and one's expectations in relation to the "contentment of life" shrink.

The Biblical hero experiences the world on the side of abundance. This experience does not justify waste, profligacy, and carelessness. The Bible assumes that virtue is about bending judgment towards generosity and trust while cultivating ultimate values that are neither predatory nor unfriendly to the happiness of others. It does so with full awareness of human potential for evil, even radical evil.

The Erosion of the Hebrew Ethos

The Bible runs a parallel story articulating the transformation and partial erosion of its original ethos of non-violent prosperity. If people really clash over scarce resources, it is the rare exception (e.g., shipwreck), not ordinary life. When

[53] Scott Straus, **The Order of Genocide: Race, Power, and War in Rwanda**, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 2006, p. 246.

[54] See Straus, **The Order of Genocide...**, Ch. 8.

[55] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 30.

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humanity descends into corruption and violence, Noah, his family and every creature on earth can live on a tiny Ark. According to the Bible, it is not the number of resources available that counts towards survival, but the virtues of those sharing them (Genesis 6:5).

God's blessing for Abraham is about population increase, prosperity and a special relationship with other peoples: "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Being blessed in one's name stands in stark opposition to the Hellenic fame (*kleos*, *timē*). Abraham is blessed with neither victory nor dominance. Glory and admiration are not mentioned either. Later, Abraham falls into doubt (Genesis 15:2–4). God's promise shrinks a bit. Abraham will inherit a tiny piece of land (relative to the whole earth) at the expense of a sinful nation, but only after a long and miserable delay, because God will not dispossess someone unless his sins are as bad as Cain's, the people of the Deluge or the Sodomites (Genesis 15:13–21). [56] It is clear that Abraham's need for a "place under the sun" [57] does not justify conquest, but only God's just judgment of the would be conquered. God unites the blessings to Abraham when they are reaffirmed to his son Isaac. He will increase with success, nations will be blessed through him, and his offspring will inherit the land (Genesis 26:1–4).

Then, things get complicated. Rebecca commits Cain's error, thinking that only one grace is on the offering, and that it is about to be given to the wrong brother. She thinks that abundance is limited and that blessings are competitive. She sends Jacob to cheat on his father. In my reading, the blessing Isaac intends to bestow on Esau is quite different from those expected by Rebecca. Isaac introduced domination to the blessing of his hunter-son, "May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers and may the sons of your mother bow

[56] The Talmudic rabbis explain that the Sodomites excluded and abused foreigners in fear that outsiders might erode their riches (Tosefta Sotah 3:3). In other places, the rabbis render Sodom as an alternative set of moral values. Sodom's perceptions of its rich natural resources led them to cruelty towards others (Talmud Sanhedrin 109a). Moral diversity results from perceptions of available resources and potential threats.

[57] Germany's foreign minister, Bernhard von Bülow in the Reichstag, December 6th, 1897 "In one word: We do not want to put anyone in the shade, but we too demand our place in the sun" (Margaret MacMillan, **The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914**, Random House, New York 2013, p. 45). A hundred years later, future Israeli Prime Minister wrote a book on Zionism, whose Hebrew title is **A Place Under the Sun**. I wonder why the English version is **A Place Among the Nations**. See Benjamin Netanyahu, **A Place Among the Nations: Israel and The World**, Bantam, New York 1993.

down to you" (Genesis 27:29. See also Genesis 33:3). This is not Abraham's blessing. Unlike Cain, Esau knows that there could be more than one blessing (Genesis 27:38); but there cannot be a plurality in domination. Dominance is a positional good. No two brothers can be blessed with dominance over each other. When the misidentification is discovered, Isaac says it clearly to Esau: "You will live by the sword, and you will serve your brother. But when you grow restless, you will throw his yoke from off your neck". Now, the brothers are entangled in a historical struggle. But the original blessing to Abraham was different. Had Jacob waited, he would have received it without stirring sib rivalry, without caring about relationships of power. He will inherit one small piece of land (Infinitely less share of the earth than expected by Cain and Abel!), no dominance over other people, and, yet he will enjoy increase, abundance and in him all the families of the earth will be blessed:

> May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now reside as a foreigner, the land God gave to Abraham. (Genesis 28:3–4).

According to the Bible, nobody needs more than this. Out of excessive alarmism, Jacob fell into the trap of a zero-sum game with his brother. Had Rebecca or Jacob conversed with Isaac on the matter, history might have taken a different course. But the Bible is dominated by God's voice and dialogues with God, not by dialogues among humans.

In a monotheistic world, there is little space for debating fundamental issues. Deliberation and fierce debate may flourish, but only within the demarcated doctrinal limits. There is always a risk of violent suppression when the public challenge to deliberate crosses the boundaries of orthodoxy (Numbers 14; Numbers 17).

The **Iliad** does not promote a new vision of human existence but stresses the human need for cooperation through deliberation. In the beginning, cooperation is limited to small social circles. The heroes of the **Iliad** never bother to treat their own foot soldiers as equals and worthy of rational deliberation. Whereas participation is quite limited, the content and extent of reflection is not. Nobody stops the heroes from questioning whatever they wish; they do not shy from offending the gods (e.g., Diomedes and Aphrodite in Book 5; Agamemnon and Apollo's priest

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in Book 1; Achilles and Apollo, Book 22). Achilles discovers that even though he might be skeptical about all values, he cannot help reasoning with some other people about values.

The Bible tolerates neither skepticism nor defiance of divine authority. The Hebrew Bible and its rabbinic exegeses posit the paradox inherent in a tradition of moral revolution. Abraham defiantly rejects the values of his father and his heathen culture. It is not anger with the gods or traumatic life experience that brings Abraham to smash his father's sacred idols (Genesis Rabbah, 38), but critical rational reflection (Genesis Rabbah 39:1). Abrahamic individualism is extreme in its extolment of one person's courage to think for oneself and reject the faith of his father and of his culture. The rabbis say that whereas the whole world is on one bank [of a metaphoric river], Abraham is on the other (Genesis Rabbah 42:2). Abraham exercises critical rejection of the culture he was born into. He wants his son to follow in his footsteps; but his footsteps are rebellious. The moment his beloved son was born, Abraham circumcised him, symbolically preempting Isaac from emulating Abraham's break with his father's faith. At least for the irreversible mark on his body, Isaac will never be able to break away completely from his father, the way his father did with his. The past is marked in the flesh. The human family is once again divided between the Chosen People and all the rest. Abraham is not obsessed with scarce resources, but with a new kind of alarmism — the risk of offspring rebellion. It is not Oedipal; Abraham takes care of his father and does not leave him until he dies naturally (Genesis Rabbah 39:7. See Genesis 27:41). It is the Biblical version of anxiety about procreation and education. It is also noteworthy that when God hands down orders to Abraham, the latter avoids a decent dialogue with Isaac (Genesis 22:7–9). Whatever Abraham inferred by his critical inquiry, in traditional Judaism, only the revelation of the Torah in Sinai creates a binding law (Maimonides exegesis to Mishna Hulin, 7). According to some medieval rabbis, most or all rabbinic controversies result from lost traditions, not a need for deliberation. [58] Unresolved controversies are suspended until the Prophet Elijah accompanies the Messiah and reveals the truth (The anonymous Medieval Book Ha'Aruch, Mark 500). The Israelites are open to foreign ideas, even in government, but only within the paradigm of the Hebrew Revelation (Exodus 18:14–27). This is very different from the consultations and debates

[58] See Moshe Halbertal, **Al De'rekh Ha'E'met. Ramban and The Creation of Tradition**, Shalom Hartman Institute [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2006, pp. 23–26.

we find in the **Iliad** (and the Hellenic tradition), in which peers cannot help but create ideas and forge binding agreements through rational deliberation.

A hallmark of the classical tradition is openness to foreign ideas and lack of unconditional commitment to tradition. [59] In this manner it is possible to develop some moral ideas found locally alongside others, found elsewhere. There is no anxiety about preserving the purity of one's own culture. The challenge lies in the possibility of bottom-up deliberation that is open and is unregulated by a coercive authority, like the Leviathan. In the next section I will discuss the transition from Hobbes to Rawls as embodying the syncretic message in this article – the fusion of some Hellenic and Biblical ideas as the foundation of liberal democracy.

The hope invested in rational deliberation

The emergence of deliberation in ancient Greece was later challenged by forms of tyranny. [60] This is even more evident from Thomas Hobbes, who studied Greek history and literature, and whose influence looms large over contemporary political theory. Hobbes thinks that deliberation is a dangerous and futile foundation for political life. In the **Leviathan**, Thomas Hobbes represents a world opposite to the one envisioned in the Hebrew Bible. In both, life is hard and short, however, according to Hobbes, scarcity, or fear of scarcity, inevitably produces a pre-political world in which a devastating war of all against all is always an impending reality, the only escape from which is submission to absolutism. Hobbes employs five adjectives to describe primeval human life: "Solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". [61] Regardless of how pitiful human life can be, the Bible does not see society as being on the precipice of "war of all against all", nor does the Bible imply that life is not worth living. As for the first problem, solitary life, God notices it immediately and creates a solution. Man and woman have each other; they are not necessarily solitary. A family is a cooperative setting. Human cooperation depends

[59] See Rémi Brague, **Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization**, St. Augustine's Press, South Bend 2009, Ch. 5.

[60] See Peter J. Ahrensdorf, **Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy: Rationalism and Religion in Sophocles' Theban Plays**, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.

[61] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 13.

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on dialogue. The **Iliad** opens with a complex dialogue; it takes time until the Biblical heroes engage in dialogue, let alone deliberation.

Whereas Eve is conversing with the serpent, there is no dialogue between Adam and Eve (one is implied in Genesis 3:17). Nonetheless, we never find Adam and Eve talking with each other. They are not involved in the conflict between Cain and Abel, either. In the Bible, the first time one spouse talks to another is Sarah's request to banish Ishmael. It is the first parental involvement in sib rivalry. God's mediation is needed for a joint decision (Genesis 21:10–12). [62]

The next dialogue between a man and a woman also appears in relation to the management of sib rivalry. It is not a deliberative dialogue, because action precedes oral argumentation. Rebecca first decides what to do. However, in contrast with her conduct in relation to the blessings, she does not conspire to cheat her husband. She addresses him directly, albeit with a specious justification. He does not answer; but he complies with her request without divine mediation (Genesis 27:45–28:1). The first man-woman deliberation comes from existential despair over infertility (Genesis 30:1–3). This dialogue leads to a practical and creative solution, one that uses another woman but also expands a basic human category beyond its natural constraints (what motherhood is).

As God's direct presence in the Bible is slowly diminishing, in the one book in which the word God does not appear at all, deliberation takes center stage — this is the Book of Esther. There, we find a satire of formal deliberations in which silly men discuss the fate of women as objects of pleasure (Esther 1:13–22). The most common expression in the book of Esther is "If it is good in the King's eyes," "If the king desires..." (Esther 6:7). One day it would be good to authorize a genocide (Esther 3:8), on another day it might be better to retract his permission and authorize the mass killing of the would-be perpetrators of the genocide (Esther 8:3). The Book of Esther is a dark parody of Leviathan.

[62] There are two dialogues between a man and a woman in the **Iliad** (Hector and Andromache; Hector and Helen, Book 6:344ff). Helen's self-deprecating language fits the status of a captured woman and does not allow the development of genuine deliberation. Only after his death does Helen talk to Hector once again, praising him for the respectful treatment he, and only he, not even Paris, had given her (Book 24:762–775). Seeds of deliberation were planted; the battlefield uprooted them.

In the Book of Esther, we find a full dialogue between a man and a woman, and neither has power over the other. (According to the Talmud, Mordecai and Esther were husband and wife — Megilla 13b.) In this dialogue both parties share ideas and prescribe action to the other party; each faces considerable risks (Esther 4:4–16). The interlocutors are under oppression. Esther had been taken to warm the king's bed; Mordecai is a dignitary at the focus of a genocidal enemy. In the Bible, lack of power does not undermine deliberation, but, rather, facilitates it.

It is not clear what Hobbes would say about a capricious and murderous tyranny as depicted in the book of Esther. [63] Hobbes maintains that the Leviathan loses legitimacy when it fails to protect the life of its subjects; without peace, it is *ipso facto* not a Leviathan anymore. [64] If fear of war of all against all predominates politics and morality, one may argue that the price of suppressing anarchy might be the ethnic cleansing of one dispersed people in an empire encompassing 127 nations (according to Esther 1:1), one fifth of the world's population (as modern scholars estimate the size of Ahasuerus's empire). [65] In the Peloponnesian Wars, which took place in the absence of a Leviathan, several hundred thousand perished relative to a much smaller population, generating a demographic shock. [66] Indeed, behind a veil of ignorance, it might be possible that people would take the tiny risk of being targeted for killing to pacify society. [67] The Book of Esther implies that the slaughter of nearly 76,000 people brought about peace and prosperity to the whole empire. (This is the number of people killed by the Jews at the happy ending of the book). Without the public art of free, equal and rational deliberation, who will determine the price of peace and liberty? How it might be decided that the Leviathan loses legitimacy?

[63] He mentions the book in chapter 33 of the **Leviathan** but does not discuss its content.

[64] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 17.

[65] See Barry Strauss, **The Battle of Salamis: The Naval Encounter That Saved Greece – and Western Civilization**, Simon and Schuster, New York 2004, p. 37.

[66] See Victor D. Hanson, **A War Like No Other: How the Athenians and Spartans Fought the Peloponnesian War**, Random House, New York 2005, Epilogue.

[67] In his reading of chapter 14 of the Leviathan, Rawls says that, according to Hobbes, personal survival trumps moral principles, and that the problem of free riding and evil manipulation may justify what otherwise we might consider odious behavior. See John Rawls, **Lectures on The History of Political Philosophy**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 66 and 70.

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Hobbes does not explicate how the social contract is created. He skips the apparently indispensable discussions among the participants. Perhaps, because Achilles's reflection and retreat dissolve the moment his emotions are stirred back to violence, Hobbes does not follow the Homeric tract in which the potential for explosive violence and anarchy brings forth non-violent deliberation towards joint decision-making. Hobbes does not explain why the grim "state of nature" leads to absolutism, rather than to deliberative democracy, or other social structures such as the lawlessness of the cyclops or the prosperous productivity of the Phoenicians (as described in the **Iliad**). [68]

Geoffrey Vaughan explains why Hobbes did not believe in the possibility of bottom-up democracy. [69] In the Hellenic tradition, truth is the mature fruit of opinions coming under scrutiny in dialogue (Topics 100a30). Hobbes did not believe it was possible to come by a productive discourse unless some fundamental axioms are agreed upon first. According to Hobbes, the only way people can reach an agreement is by the indirect route of the social contract; they need the Leviathan to dictate those axioms to them. Freely formed ("bottom-up") opinions are a political danger, because people will resort to violence when their opinions differ. Additionally, Hobbes argued that democratic deliberation is prone to become "an aristocracy of orators". [70] Today we might worry that "fake news" and other manipulations of public opinion prevail over rational and free argumentation, that liberal democracy might be on the brink of dissolution by lies, and that human language and creativity might be flooded by AI-generated content. Hobbes's limi-

[68] For Hobbes, every democracy was a direct democracy, in which all citizens meet face to face for decision making. This allows for the election of a leader, but not for daily decision making. Hobbes was concerned with legitimization of authority, not with methods of practical decision making. Indeed, his attitude on personal opinion fits this model, as the choice of a monarch (or "prime minister" or "dictator") needs not be "right" but be "legitimate". But he regarded governance as a product of deliberation among ministers, not of popular deliberation. See Richard Tuck, **The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2016, Ch. 2.

[69] See Geoffrey M. Vaughan, "Hobbes's Contempt for Opinion: Manipulation and the Challenge for Mass Democracies", *Critical Review* 1999, Vol. 13, No. 1–2, pp. 55–71, https://doi.org/10.1080/08913819908443522.

[70] Thomas Hobbes, **The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic**, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, Simpkin, Marshall & Co., London 1889, Part II, Ch. 2, https://tiny.pl/2hkmyng3r [5.08.2026]; discussed by J. Matthew Hoye, **Sovereignty as a Vocation in Hobbes's Leviathan: New Foundations, Statecraft and Virtue**, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2024, pp. 43–44.

nal position was the constant possibility of "war of all against all". A new brinkmanship might emerge with the awareness that free humans who are under no threat of violent anarchy or starvation might nevertheless be lured by artificial outputs to dictate social order, direct personal modes of thinking, and decide whether war, or even tyranny, is justified and necessary.

Hobbes gainsays the possibility of conscientious judgments, at least for most people. He believes that human thinking is merely a product of external sense perceptions. [71] Hence, it is better that people absorb the sovereign's dictates by exposure to the appropriate stimuli rather than harbor heterodox ideas that are unlikely to come together into peaceful coexistence. In other words, to live in a peaceful society, people must overcome their personal conscience and follow the dictates of the sovereign. [72] There is no buildup of public agreement from interpersonal conscientious deliberation.

Vaughan points out that John Rawls proposed a theory of justice and just institutions based on people's rational reflection on their freely formed opinions ("considered judgments"). Inspired by the decentralized and bottom-up success of modern science, Rawls might have concluded that people can develop good social institutions as much as they can develop reliable science and technology with no need for axioms imposed by a sovereign power. Andrius Gališanka makes the case that Rawls was influenced by logical positivism, [73] and game theory. [74] Indeed, the rise of computer science and the success of the American Revolution, and of the gigantic bureaucratic machineries like the United States Army during World War II might have directed Rawls's thinking towards efficient institutions, rather than addressing justice directly. In addition to Vaughan's insights, we may add those by Katrina Forrester, who suggests that Rawls considered pluralism as a safeguard against the rise of either militia or state power. [75] I will now argue that Rawls's

[71] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 1.

[72] See Hobbes, **Leviathan...**, Ch. 29.

[73] See Andrius Gališanka, **John Rawls: The Path to A Theory of Justice**, University of California, Berkeley 2013 (PhD dissertation).

[74] See Andrius Gališanka, "Just Society as a Fair Game: John Rawls and Game Theory in the 1950s", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2017, Vol. 78, No. 2, pp. 299–308, https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2017.0017.

[75] See Forrester, **In the Shadow of Justice...**, p. 52.

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success lies in his commitment to basic values as well, and to combining them with theories of fair procedures. On this point there is much similarity with another post-World War II philosopher – Jürgen Habermas. [76]

Rawls's greatest insight might be that people do not need to share basic truths to develop political discourses and agreements. Rather, public discourse is the melting pot of diverse opinions, which, at the end, operates like Adam Smith's invisible hand in bringing people towards prosperous and just political agreements more than they could expect from top-down planning, even if the "top" is God's own word. [77] For Rawls, the state is not a sort of agent, let alone an omnipotent one like the Leviathan. [78]

The issue at hand is not epistemic. According to Hobbes, if we allow every person to be a "judge of good and evil actions", disagreement will lead to violence in the name of justice and truth. However, if conscientious judgments are constructed through social interaction and if people behold themselves as "judges of good and evil", but not the ultimate judges, the cumulative input from the interaction of many personal judgments can create just public policies. Hence, Rawls' insight is doubly original. First, he acknowledges the possibility of institutions and laws created by interpersonal deliberation. By Hobbes's own logic, there is no need to show their superiority in terms of truthfulness to any other system of government. Any institution or system that is not inferior to the Leviathan as a pacifier of bloody anarchy should be fine. Then, Rawls does not think that individuals need to agree on much. Many ultimate concerns may be left to individual and communal pursuits without deleterious social and environmental effects. This thesis does not need argumentation either. Hobbes showed that discord may lead to civil war; he did not show that abolishing all discord is necessary for peace or cooperation. Rawls also solves the problem of two masters. If conscience is cultivated dialectically through discourse with others, there is no inherent conflict between divergent sources of authority. [79]

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[76] See Jürgen Habermas, **Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy**, Polity Press, Oxford 1997.

[77] See Amartya Sen, **The Idea of Justice**, Belknap Press, Cambridge 2009, Ch. 2.

[78] See Forrester, **In the Shadow of Justice...**, p. 77.

[79] See Yechiel Michael Barilan and Margherita Brusa, "Triangular Reflective Equilibrium: A Conscience-based Method for Bioethical Deliberation", *Bioethics* 2011, Vol. 25, No. 6, pp. 304–319, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8519.2009.01797.x.

Rawls explains that Hobbes's political theory is survival-oriented, not a moral theory, acknowledging the possibility that if human survival is on the cusp of annihilatory "war of all against all", then Hobbes might be right. Hobbes's state of nature is "an ever-present possibility", which an efficient Leviathan renders "improbable", but not impossible. The disposition is always there. [80] According to the Biblical ethos, however, a moral theory cannot be obsessed by survival. Morality requires goals that are valuable for their own sake, not as mere escapes from harm. Morality comes with hope, not existential fears. [81]

Despite his horrid war experience in the Pacific, and although Rawls developed his philosophy in the shadow of the Cold War, while the world was indeed on the brink of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction), Rawls's optimism about deliberation, liberal values and democracy is remarkable. Rawls might have been the first thinker to graft Biblical values onto Homer's insight about the human potential for non-violent and reflective coping in the face of existential darkness.

[80] See Rawls, **Lectures on The History of Political Philosophy...**, pp. 32 and 41.

[81] See Yechiel Michael Barilan, "From Hope in Palliative Care to Hope as a Virtue and a Life Skill", *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology* 2012, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 165–181.

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Rawls may owe the pragmatism in such a vision to Thomas Dewar Weldon (whom he must have met during his stay in Oxford), a veteran of both world wars and a staff officer in RAF Bomber Command, which was responsible for the horrific strategic bombings. When the Cold War was brewing, Weldon argued that political theories do not depend on solid metaphysical foundations. This means that key words, such as "freedom" and "justice," are context dependent. At the end of his book, while acknowledging the danger of nuclear annihilation, Weldon also points to the absurdity of global power, a sort of Leviathan that would police nuclear weapons. According to Weldon, only pragmatic politics, rather than either the search for true philosophy or the possibility of a Hobbesian peace broker, can save humanity from destruction.[82] Weldon writes that it is pointless to ask whether Hobbes, or Hegel or Marx was right.[83] Despite his conviction that these philosophies were incommensurable, Weldon was optimistic about the prospects of political negotiations among Monarchists, Dialecticians and Marxists. It would be rather difficult to tell whether such negotiations will land us closer to justice or closer to the bending of justice in favor of the powerful and cunning forces in society. Perhaps, he thought the word "justice" was meaningless outside a specific theoretical and social context. Weldon's pragmatism might give us an illustration of how a Hobbesian social contract is developed. Truth would be defined by the potentate who reins in nuclear Armageddon.[84] Rawls showed greater optimism, perhaps inspired by the Christianity of his youth, especially the ideas of human dignity and love.[85] Those who believe that anarchy is around the corner might be tempted to follow Hobbes and sign a contract with other terrified people to submit collectively to a Leviathan. The Hebrew Bible wishes people wouldn't take the danger of anarchy as so imminent and the solutions to this danger so harsh.

The Bible and the Talmud do not profess Judaism as the sole prescription against anarchy and despotism; it is only a constitution handed down by God to a small nation. The rabbis objected to reading the Torah as a moral law. They con-

[82] See Thomas Dewar Weldon, **States and Morals: A Study in Political Conflicts**, John Murray, London 1946, p. 192.

[83] See Weldon, **States and Morals...**, p. 39.

[84] This is a Biblical mode of thinking too. The first act of creation is the annihilation of chaos.

[85] See Eric Gregory, **Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship**, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2010.

sidered it a religious law that fits God's vision (Talmud *Berakhot* 33b). God's laws are not open for rational criticism, even though rational inquiry is the chief means of settling legal and theological debates within its framework. I have argued that the Hebrew Bible carries messages about the source of human evil, and the dispositions necessary for virtuous persons and just societies. Even though it is customary to behold the old Jewish religion as the "religion of the law" (From Paul to Moses Mendelssohn and Immanuel Kant), I have argued that the Biblical narratives carry moral messages pertaining to **virtuous worldviews**. These are the cultivated dispositions to hold to factual judgments that defuse justifications for aggression, suspicion, despotism and nihilism.

Synthetic conclusion: from existential crisis to human dignity

In the **Iliad**, I have traced a process in which conflicts bring people to suspend all values, and to examine valuation rationally. Biblical foundational values, not available to the Homeric heroes, can feed these processes of deliberation. In non-religious language, they are the goodness of life and the inviolability of the human person.

The Biblical heroes might argue with God and may form judgments independent of God's. But they doubt neither God's presence, nor the final validity of His words, even when He sends his faithful to kill (Genesis 22:2). Rather, the human contact with God infuses life with meaning and comfort, even when life is an absurdity washed with agony (Job 42:5–6).

The heroes of the **Iliad** know no God. They have no axis to unite their values in some harmony, no transcendental source of comfort. Early in the story, Achilles discovers a set of properties unique to humans: the capacity to lose interest in any value whatsoever; the capacity to desire certain things more than life (e.g., glory), and then, to lose the desire for both. He realizes that nihilism always lurks behind ambition, identity, and emotion. If life and honor can be disvalued, everything can be. This is most evident in Book 9, where Achilles questions the validity of the heroic code. He wavers in the way he refers to the woman, the fight over whom sparked off the poem. He says she is his beloved wife (Book 9:340), a war prize (Book 1), and someone less valuable than his dearest friend (Book 9:55–60). It is

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unclear to Achilles what Briseis really means to him. Achilles does not question the treatment of women as trophies. It is difficult to tell whether Achilles's doubts in relation to the heroic values constitute a genuine moral awakening or are merely delusional ravings (Book 19:86ff.).

This is how deliberation about values and the means to realize them kicks in. One needs to converse with others to know whether one is perspicuous or crazy. If one wishes others to help, or at least not to block one's way, one must be able to explain why one's goals are worthy and why going one's way is more important than the reasons that motivate its blocking. One wishes to search with others for solutions that empower all persons involved. Otherwise, life remains an arbitrary flow of desires, abandonments, pains and satisfactions. Achilles made the first moves in the direction of a deliberative and peaceful society. He suspends all his other motivations, even the desire to survive. He retreats from action and engages others in dialogue. Achilles's retreat lasted fifty days, a tiny fraction of a ten-year war; yet it occupies fifty of the fifty-one days covered by the poem.

The Biblical tradition indicates a few principles to craft a substantive set of values: life is good, humans can thrive without domination of one over another, when in doubt whether someone is about to attack, restrain hostilities. [86] These positive attitudes, which I called "virtuous worldviews", shed light on the road from Hobbes to Rawls. In Hobbes's vision, escape from the risk of bloody anarchy predominates over liberty and truth, whereas Rawls's commitment to human dignity fosters optimism in relation to decentralized and peaceful construction of social order by rational deliberation.

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[86] Especially after the Second World War. A generous peace built on reconstruction and mutual respect — rooted in an attitude of trust — has become vital in restraining violence. One landmark example is Winston Churchill's speech at the University of Zurich on October 19th, 1946, https://tiny.pl/3_nt8x5s3 [5.08.2026].

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