THE EPIC SEARCH FOR A MEANINGFUL EXISTENCE IN MODERNITY:
AN ANCIENT AND EXISTENTIAL EXPLORATION IN THE NAME OF DEATH

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ABSTRACT

Who am I and how do I live meaningfully? These questions seem innate in man’s DNA, perhaps two constants the human race has forever endured. Underlying these questions is the need to connect, to engage in meaningful relationships with the self, through the self, with others. These connections take the form of stories.

However relentless the questions, the factors catalyzing them and the attempts to respond have evolved in scope and nature concurrently with man’s home—the universe.

In fact, the evolution of the universe has profoundly affected how man responds. Namely, as these studies will theorize, the introduction of a virtual realm and the prospect of a deathless existence—both of which are to said to culminate in the near future in a phenomenon called Singularity—have already contributed to the current generation’s sense of loss, disconnect, and fragmentation, often lacking meaningful connections to an authentic self-narrative and to the human Story.

While progress takes new forms (cyberspace and Singularity), the symptoms of a diseased, displaced peoples shows itself in familiar ways:
living in and for the moment, postponing aging, eliminating death, resisting Absolutes, and insisting on the self. These factors may be most familiar to the 19th and 20th century Existentialists whose own self-creating lives were driven by a similar crisis of being; but they are equally apparent in the narratives our earliest storytelling ancestors crafted, namely in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The majority of this study attempts to substantiate this theory through an Existential reading of the epics, primarily of how epic heroes respond to the questions of being: from an aesthetic to ethical response, to becoming a knight of faith or Übermensch. And this analytical reading ultimately culminates in determining a predominant factor in fostering an authentic, engaged existence: the reality of death.

If these propositions can be logically proven true, what then becomes of the individual who may one day, perhaps sooner than we think, find himself existing in a virtual world of abstractions? And a physical world on the brink of eliminating death? The final chapter attempts to use the Existential study of Homer’s epics to garner a more informed understanding of the next phase in earthly existence in terms of living authentically, and acting ethically.
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INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEM OF EXISTING, THEN AND NOW

I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult?
—Herman Hesse, Demian

Game-Changers

Ryan Halligan died on October 7, 2003. He was only thirteen—a high school freshman—and the cause of death was suicide, his response to the cyberbullying he endured on his My Space page. Ryan’s story goes on record as one of the earliest accounts of a now too-common trend: teenage suicide catalyzed by online bullying. While Ryan Halligan is not exactly a household name, his story has played an instrumental role in getting initial legislation passed aimed at regulating behaviors in cyberspace.¹

Nearly forty years earlier, another high school student was about to make headlines. It began with his appearance on the then popular game show, I’ve Got a Secret. His name was Raymond Kurzweil, and his secret was that he had built a computer capable of composing original music scores on its own. As with Halligan, the effects of Kurzweil’s story ended up shocking society; after all, he, a

mere teenager, had constructed a machine to do what was previously believed to be a purely human endeavor: create art—a feat that ultimately challenged the source of creativity and blurred the line “between organic intelligence and artificial intelligence.”² Now, forty-six years later, scientists recognize how that single performance augured the profound and permanent changes to our humanity that Kurzweil recognizes to be on the horizon:

We’re approaching a moment when computers will become intelligent, and not just intelligent but more intelligent than humans. When that happens, humanity—our bodies, our minds, our civilization—will be completely and irreversibly transformed...this moment is not only inevitable but imminent.³

This “imminent” transformation, a phenomenon predicted to transpire within the next three decades, goes by the name of the Singularity, a term borrowed from astrophysicists used to identify a point in space-time “at which the rules of ordinary physics do not apply.”⁴ Was this, in some way, what Ryan Halligan was up against: a changing game of existence in new space-time for which no new rules have yet been set?

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.
Humanity—"bodies...minds...civilization"—continues to evolve, and as it does, the very nature of existing poses new problems in new ways, and even in new dimensions of space-time. New problems necessitate new responses, and maybe even new rules, both by and for the existing individual. Man has always sought to better understand the nature of the self (Who am I?), particularly in terms of his place (Why am I here?). The questions of being, of identity, and of the struggle to respond meaningfully—especially in light of our increasingly complex universe—comprise the heart of each story we read and each one we live.

Man ultimately desires to be the hero of his own self-created narrative. And if it is true that “our identities...are shaped in ways both subtle and profound, by our heroes,” then perhaps the modern tendency to deconstruct archetypal heroes or even replace them an anti-hero has, at last, taken its toll on the collective unconscious of our 21st century mindset. Do our historical heroes no longer suffice? Are our modern heroes good enough? What do we need from our

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heroes nowadays? After all, “we cannot meaningfully be without history; so can history be meaningful without its hero stories”?  

**Stories of Existence**

Existing is a state of being, which for each individual, is both an event and an evolution. Since the individual does not always exist, he must enter into existence (the event), and in doing so, enter the first of countless consecutive moments advancing him closer to his existence’s end (the evolution). What exactly he enters into is what one might name *life* or *existence*, or *Story*.  

Each man enters this Story *in medias res*: thrust into the middle of all things, instantaneously immersed into an abyss of potential amidst others at once being-there, *Dasein*. Man’s existence is comprised of preludes and epilogues totally unknown to but entirely surrounding him, resulting in an individual narrative that is but a fragment of a collective tale, “the story of mankind,” which is, in fact, “the story of Story itself.”

On the one hand, entering into existence in the middle of things could offer comfort, perhaps somewhat akin to a newborn swaddled in sheets, cradled in arms—enveloped, cushioned, protected, loved and

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7 Thomsan, “Deconstructing the Hero,” 40.


9 Ibid.
fed without ever needing to ask. Man is birthed into layers of events, chapters of an epic narrative already on-going and self-perpetuating.

Yet at the same time, this sudden immersion into the great narrative of existence is bound to induce confusion, if not dread and anxiety, maybe even fear and trembling, as well: “The total character of the world . . . is in all eternity chaos—in the sense . . . of a lack of order.”

And nothing unnerves and awakens the human mind more than disjointed fragments and seemingly random unknowns—lack of’s, nothing’s. This anxiety is especially heightened when these voids concern one’s own identity and place in this world (“How do I relate? Where do I belong? Why do these parts matter?”). Kathryn Morton reminds us of just how integral finding connections is to our evolving human species:

We did not arise from the ape with a sharp rock, or even from the one who learned how to sharpen a dull rock, but from the one who saw the connection between sharpness of rock and soon-ness of supper. He pictured himself settling down to eat and made the connection that now would be a good time to go gather some rocks from the stream down below, so they’d be ready when meat waddled by. The Leakey expeditions have found piles of ready rocks at sites where the only other evidence of humanoid life is a few million-year-old bones.

The fact that man did not evolve from inventors, but rather, from connection-makers is an important one, especially in helping us better

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understand why the problem of existing is inherent in our being: The “warp in the simian brain...made us insatiable for patterns—patterns of sequence, of behavior, of feeling—connections, reasons, causes: stories.” These stories help babies to create, by age three, nearly 1,000 trillion connections of the 100 billion neurons with which we are born—twice as many connections we will have by the time we are adults. Man’s storytelling evolution intimates that existing, from as early as birth, is the process of crafting one’s narrative, of making sense of and connecting the pieces that surround the self. Storytelling is so integral to the human experience, it has been said “we as species might appropriately be named Homo narrans rather than Homo sapiens,” always seeking to make sense of our sudden immersion.

However, existing does not only commence with one being thrust in the middle of things. From the Greek roots ex, meaning “out from”, and sistere, meaning “cause to stand,” to exist is actually to cause one


to stand out from, separate from, apart. The result is a fragmented individual cut off from self, story, and/or others.

Perhaps we’re moving towards better articulating the problem of existing. The fact is, it involves, if not requires, a constant and concurrent state of being both apart from and a part of. Existing separates and immerses, expects autonomy and requires relationship, as one works from the middle out and from the outside in.

Social Media, Facebook in particular, seems the most obvious and compelling case in point of modern man’s daily struggle with this delicate balancing act of duality. Facebook embodies if not exacerbates this very paradox of existing. At any given moment, or more accurately, at every single moment, each of the current 901 million users\textsuperscript{16} is instantaneously connected to an exponential number of people, and yet at the same moment, he or she is typically isolated—alone on a laptop, stuck in a cubicle, locked in the bedroom. Mostly alone yet infinitely connected; at once faceless and pictured, private and public. And yet, to initiate this connection, to “sign on” to one’s homepage, a “user” first must remove himself from current conversation and company. The choice is to disconnect in order to reconnect elsewhere. As technology helps empower individuals to be

increasingly more separate, perhaps even more autonomous and certainly more connected, man’s attempt to negotiate the paradoxes of existing may be more possible and more difficult than ever before. The Existentialist Jean Paul Sartre’s words seem apt in light of this cyber-existence: “I am not myself and can never be myself, because my being stretching out beyond itself at any given moment exceeds itself. I am always simultaneously more and less than I am.”17

The introduction of the world-wide Web has only served to exponentially elongate man’s existential “stretching,” ever more so on the brink of becoming an abstraction, of being separated from his original whole, and potentially reliant on some other entity to bear his properties. This is precisely what Kurzweil hypothesizes in the Singularity, a post-human synthesis of man and technology, when he claims “we will successfully reverse-engineer the human brain by the mid-2020s” at which point it may be possible to scan one's consciousness into a computer. Certainly this phenomenon would propel the concept of existence in the abstract to a whole new level, one in which man and machine is no longer distinguishable, one that seems close at hand, and one that we may not yet be prepared to face in terms of how it will impact the place, the purpose, the meaning of our ongoing narratives.

17 Barrett, Irrational Man, 246.
Perhaps the strongest adversaries against the abstraction of human life have been the Existential philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Heidegger, in particular, recognized Platonic notions as the point in time humans began to approach the basic questions of existence erroneously, redirecting focus on trying to think and understand self instead of focusing on the immediacy of existence. In returning the question of self to the objects of direct experience, the Existential spirit, while no longer an active formalized movement, continues to be alive in and relevant to the 21st century being. The ideas at the core of Existential philosophy are increasingly applicable to existing in modernity:

[Existentialism] embodies the self-questioning of the time, seeking to reorient itself to its own historical destiny... Alienation and estrangement; a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of Nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat... and they all circulate around a common center... the radical feeling of human finitude... But the truth about man is never to be found in one quality that opposes another, but in both qualities at once. . . . 18

What the Existential scholar, William Barrett, explains as “both... at once” reinforces what Simone de Beauvoir will call our “fundamental ambiguity.” 19 Thinking in terms of “either/or's”


(hypotaxis), regardless of how clean and efficient the method may be, is not sufficient; it is in the “both/and’s” (parataxis) of our humanness/humanity where “the truth about man” resides. These both/and tensions relate to those at the heart of humankind’s Story: both individuality of experience and universality of reason; both objectivity of truth and subjectivity of meaning; both limitations of human finitude and desire for transcendence; personal fulfillment and social/moral responsibility; both autonomy and relationship.\(^{20}\)

Either way, at a most basic level, the question of existing is a matter of relationship—an essential aspect of the Existential worldview, which contends that all that exists derives it meaning from its relationship with other such existent entities. John Donne proposes that “The human thing is not merely to live, to act, to love. It is to have a relationship to one’s life, one’s action, one’s love, even in the relationship is simply one of consent, simply a “Yes.”\(^{21}\) While the need to foster a relationship to one’s life remains a critical need for modern man, perhaps saying “Yes” has become increasingly more difficult. Perhaps that was why Ryan Halligan committed suicide, the

\(^{20}\) Dr. Frank Ambrosio, “Existentialism: The Search for Meaning” (lecture, Georgetown University, Fall, 2006).

“one truly serious philosophical problem;”  

saying ‘Yes’ just didn’t seem within his reach; it was the faceless others—cyber selves—who defined for him the value of his existence—one he regrettably felt was no longer one worth living.

The subsequent studies reach back to our storytelling roots, namely to Homer, not only the quintessential storyteller, but as this paper will contend, our first Existential Bard. We reach back in our attempt to better negotiate the challenges of an increasingly more complex future. Homer’s epics recount the evolution of man to warrior, warrior to hero, and in that way, man who transcends mortal existence, an evolution not unlike the current one of man into cyborg, cyborg into machine. What can an Existential reading of Homer’s epics—namely a study of its heroes—offer us as participants in the grander narrative of existence that is on the brink of expanding in new space-time? Can these early hero stories of Western tradition still help us navigate the essential questions of being? Many of the most prominent Existentialist voices “so vehemently resist[ed] the Enlightenment suggestion that the time for heroes is past;” and perhaps a look back to ponder the future will better inform our cultural tradition as we advance toward virtual storytelling.

22 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 357.

23 Thomsan, “Deconstructing the Hero,” 16.
CHAPTER 1

EXISTENTIAL EPICS

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

-F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

Ancient Blooms

Deep beneath the earth of the liberal arts’ family tree, the roots of modern Existential philosophy seem to intertwine with those of ancient Greek culture. They are the roots of civilization—of a most fundamental form of human existence. Snarled, complicated, seemingly obscure, not meant to be untangled but worth being uncovered, for the spirit of existing during antiquity seems to bud again in Existentialism and bloom even further in the post-modern, 21st century, way of life.

The ensuing studies offer a new way to approach Homer’s epics—the Iliad and the Odyssey—as some of our earliest literary renderings of the essence of Existential living. The subsequent two chapters, then, will offer an Existential reading of these epics as a means by which to reconsider both the epics and the universal questions mankind has grappled with for centuries—from the Socratic Greeks to the European Existentialists to the Ryan Halligans of today;
questions of being, of meaning, of fitting in and standing out from, as presented in the introductory chapter.

In order to meaningfully engage in an Existential reading of the epics, this first chapter attempts to identify a starting place, an analogous relationship between antiquity and modern day, from social to intellectual counterparts, to critical points of digression.

The ancient echoes we hear, namely through Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, seem, I propose, to reverberate in the nothingness of post-modern existence. And in doing so, they venture, perhaps, to resuscitate Classicism in a 21st century world. A world that, so much like its ancient roots, finds itself preoccupied with death, overwhelmed by anxiety, and filled with individuals seeking to establish relationships in order to make meaning out of the fragmented, disconnected nothingness into which they find themselves existing at any given moment.

Hence, the Existential mind may recognize in Homer’s epics a universe and an essence of existing rather familiar with his own. If this proposition can be accepted as true—a proposition that this first chapter seeks to propose, illustrate, and defend—then these Greek epics, these early human stories of our Western roots, may just offer living testaments—stories, connections, reasons—of Existential responses to being: a way of making sense of their current state of
standing both within and out from the present, ultimately, offering
new responses and rules for existing meaningfully in our game-
changing world of being—conclusions Chapter Four will seek to draw,
propose and expound upon.

Indeed, the very germ of these studies begins with my own
theorizing about how Homer’s Greeks “unveil[ed] for the rest of
mankind” a way to piece together the fragments of his existence:

The profession of philosophy did not always have the narrow
and specialized meaning it now has. In ancient Greece it had the
very opposite: instead of a specialized theoretical discipline
philosophy there was a concrete way of life, a total vision of man
and the cosmos in the light of which the individual’s whole life
was to be lived. These earliest philosophers among the Greeks
were seers, poets, almost shamans—as well as the first thinkers
. . . and everywhere in the fragments of these pre-Socratic
Greeks is the sign of a revelation greater than themselves which
they are unveiling for the rest of mankind.¹

Yes, these thinkers lived in “concrete” and “whole” terms, terms most
Existentialists would later embrace for their own reasons, reasons and
actions still relevant today, particularly in light of our increasingly
abstract and fragmented being. And if the Greeks were the originators
of these viewpoints, then, I propose, the Existentialists have become
the abstraction of them—growing, elongating, existing beyond itself.
Hence, I reason that Existentialism may be ever-more relevant to our

¹Barrett, Irrational Man, 5.
21st century search for meaning, and antiquity’s literary remnants—namely the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—may be keys to unlocking just how.

In establishing this point of reference, we may just validate not only the relationship but also the perspective. Just as Homer’s epics “presume each other, border and limit each other” and at the same time, “bespeak a decidedly polemic, controversial relationship,” so too, do the epics and this ideology—or so I hope to argue. In fact, the very nature of the ensuing study is predicated on my informed speculation that the Homeric epics may be our earliest vestiges of Existential thoughts and ideas at work. They may be our earliest written accounts—our earliest stories—of how man entered the narrative in medias res, amidst chaos, and lacking order, which ultimately awakened the human awareness of a fragmented existence.

And so, let us first consider how entangled these Epic and Existential roots just may be in order to better consider the heroes’ lives in response.

**Entangled Roots**

At the very core of it all—of life, existence, story, this theoretical argument—is the study of relationships. Namely, the link between place and self, which to a large extent, explains the

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Existential predicament: “modern man is a nameless being who finds himself, for the first time, lost: The modern man has been displaced— for the first time homeless,” a reality confounded by the introduction of cyberspace, a new place confusing new identity, a new place fragmenting the notion of home.

Albert Camus, French philosopher, classified it as absurd: “In a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. . . . This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.” Maybe no more strongly than ever does man find himself alien to his current place than in cyberspace. But this study will contend, it is a feeling as familiar to our Western ancestors, too. Their world came to resemble something akin to Nietzsche’s world in which man had destroyed the notion of a Supreme Being. “To say that God is dead is to say that there is no prospect of finding a fixed source of order and direction beneath the flux of events in the world.” In accepting this death, as

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Nietzsche questions for all of mankind, the individual is apparently left to "wander through an endless nothing."  

Society's rejection of a single divine Being as the Absolute beginning and end, as articulated by Nietzsche, resembles Homer's world. It, too, lacks a single unified deity, a constant, systematic truth; divine interaction by the Greek gods is erratic, at best. And so it plays out that despite the seeming discrepancy between the Homeric pantheistic universe and the Existential atheistic weltanschauung, these different expressions arrive at a similar conclusion. In both cases, man appears to exist in a fickle universe made up of seemingly random events, left to deal with the world and all of its "brute objectivity" on his own. The American poet and Naturalist, Stephen Crane, perhaps captured the spirit of the universe's indifference best when the speaker of his poem exclaims to the world: "I exist!" to which the universe—wholly unimpressed and unconcerned—replies: "The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation." Now consider Crane's poem in light of the ancient Greek perspective that reasoned: "Not having made the world, the gods are not responsible for it and

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6 Barrett, Irrational Man, 185.

7 Ibid., 25.

8 Stephen Crane, "A Man Said to the Universe" in War is Kind & Other Lines (Cambridge: University Press, 1899).
have no special obligation toward it."\(^9\) The universe is an object, and as the object, man, it follows, becomes the subject, again refocusing the importance on the individual.

Better yet, if we are, in fact, at the whim of the universe's \textit{brute} objectivity, existing in an irrational world, then the only way we can hope to survive is to embrace an equally powerful subjectivity. Without objective reality, there is greater emphasis on the subject, the self. And so it must be the power of the personhood—individuality—that will over-come the objective indifference of the universe.

Without objective reality, we are also left with a changing and evolving universe, most clearly recognizable in the dawn of the virtual age. The absurdity of living in a state of alienation from one's own narrative leads to an existence that simply seems not worth living; maybe that was Halligan's final conclusion. The vast majority of Existentialists denounced a system of static unchanging Absolutes as a seriously deficient or flawed way to lead each individual to a meaningful existence. Instead, they proposed that individuals need to choose and create the meaning in, for, and by themselves. Soren Kierkegaard is perhaps the Existentialist most stringent in the denial

of "objective reflection" and "systematic thought."\textsuperscript{10} He contends that moving towards a universal is concurrently "lead[ing] us away from the subjective," and in this movement, we are inevitably being led "away from ourselves."\textsuperscript{11} In alienating the self, man is moving ever further from being able to encounter and connect with the self, a critical first step in determining which actions to choose in order to fill the human shell with essence. In this way, the Existential movement begins with and depends on the individual's turn inward.

There is another consideration to be had as well. It begins with Nietzsche's suggestion that the existence of the gods actually "justified human life by living it themselves." The scholar Redfield expounds upon this notion when he offers that the immortality of the Homeric gods go so far as to "reduce our lives to insignificance,"\textsuperscript{12} and in doing so, returns man to the feeble state upon which the Existentialist built his response to existing.

It is this complex and dynamic relationship between other and self that echoes in the relationship between the epics themselves, as well as their underlying themes. Whereas the \textit{Iliad} largely concerns actions of troops, highlighted by moments of personal combat, the

\textsuperscript{10} Oaklander, \textit{Existentialist Philosophy}, 9.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
*Odyssey* is the story of a single man and his struggle to reacquaint himself with his being. The Homeric critic, George E. Dimock, Jr., proposes that “In a way, the whole problem of the *Odyssey* is for Odysseus to establish his identity,”\(^13\) and as Chapter Three will more thoroughly address, his journey to self-identity is a long, meandering, and wholly personal one that Odysseus himself not merely lives but creates. For it is only through a “proper understanding of a name” that one can come to understand his own nature of being.\(^14\) How profound the implications for a new web of virtual contacts whose names and faces may be as fictionalized or false as any ones a poet could dream up.

Be it the ancient man or the virtual man, his first home is, in fact, the womb. But, as Dimock recognizes, the symbolic nature of the womb is a place of non-existence, embodied by the Cyclops: “In the womb one has no identity, no existence worth of a name. Nonentity and identity are in fact the poles between which the actors in the poem move.”\(^15\) These two poles—nonentity and identity—apply to the Existential man, too.

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The potential hero then, including each and every one of us, the
"nameless being," begins as a nonentity. And if the cyberworld has
opened up a new realm of place, then it has inevitably altered man's
entity-ness: both in terms of nonentity and identity.

Lacking these qualities, it seems that man has always been adrift
between these two poles. Vernant, a scholar of ancient Greece,
describes the Greek hero in Homer's epics as "a homeless and
worthless drifter, a kind of nonperson."\textsuperscript{16} This language of
"nonperson" echoes that of Dimock's term "nonentity," two terms that
share the root "non", meaning "not, lack of."\textsuperscript{17} The individual begins as
a lack of being, a non entity, a no thing: nothing—the greatest
expression of which is death, the very thing man must both combat
and embrace in order to live most freely. But to what degree will man
be able to respond with authentic, engaged urgency? Chapter Two will
focus on examining different responses to this nothing as Iliadic
warriors strive to become heroes. Chapter Three will treat the same
question in terms of Odysseus, the hero who ultimately comes to
embody many characteristics of Nietzsche's Overman. The four varied

\textsuperscript{15} Dimock, "The Name of Odysseus," 60.

\textsuperscript{16} Jean-Pierre Vernant, Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays, ed. Froma I.

responses to living, and in living respond to death, provide rich fodder for any man longing to exist more meaningfully. And the question of which, if any of these men, suffice as an appropriate hero for us today, still lingers.

In each case, it is the individual who is responsible for making something of the nothing, and the single most effective way to define the self—both for the Existential man and for the Greek warrior, as the *Iliad* illuminates—happens through the deeds, actions, choices he makes when confronting the greatest nothing of all: death. “Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself;”\(^{18}\) he must shape his own being. With this goal in mind, man “goes to action in order to prove in action that he is what he claims to be.”\(^ {19}\) And since the epic is “the imitation of an action, . . . a story of free actors and their free choices,”\(^ {20}\) it is an ideal vehicle for a study of exactly how characters—individuals—determine their own essence through self-made choices, choices that help an individual evolve from a state nonentity to one of authentic identity. The supposed heroes this study will consider act (and react) in a range of ways, effecting a range of outcomes worthy of

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 129.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
deliberation, especially nowadays as we stand on the brink of a virtual “reality” in a culture of radically changing notions of heroes.

If Sartre’s words ring true, that “there is no reality except in action,” and therefore man is “therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts,” then it seems that doing becomes being: “Action... is with men.” One’s essence transpires only through that which he is chooses to do. Perhaps that explains why Achilles’ armor, crafted by Hephaestus, contains both peaceful and warlike activities of humans: the very deeds that will forever define his being. In fact, it is the warrior’s ability “to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds” that can ultimately earn him glory. Glory for Odysseus will depend on his encounters with death and his choice to immortalize these deeds through storytelling—speech and deeds that “establish his identity in harmony with the nature of things,” a complicated relationship which will be further examined in Chapter Three.

Because action predominantly defines man’s identity, he needs to live focused on and immersed in the present, a moment lingering

21 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 316.

22 Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad, 129.


between the past that no longer matters and the future of which has not yet happened. But the present moment is always fleeting and in this way, the present assumes a nature not unlike a sort of abyss, an earthly womb of sorts, in which nothing truly occurs: the perpetual state of being both apart from and a part of. The present is nothing. Then there is the future, which only serves to restrict man “by [his] belief in what [he] could be, in what [he] could hope for,” ultimately making [him] “slaves to [his] goals.”25 This form of suppression, as one subjects himself to a power outside his self, defies the fundamental belief of most Existentialists as well as the underlying approach to Greek battle: engaged existence.

The Greek warrior does just that each moment he is upon the battlefield, aware of mortality, facing death, always on the brink of confronting—although sometimes wishing to escape—the reality of a finite existence, a reality that Existentialism is rooted in, in large part because it serves to refocus the individual on the present moment that is ultimately nothing, no more than a lingering abyss between then and next. One necessary reminder of just how limited life is is that nothing, that no-thing, that death—the critical human necessity for any individual who seeks fulfillment and freedom.

25 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 341.
If the individual truly lives with engaged urgency, then he has the potential to choose freedom, a choice that, in turn, breeds personal responsibility. If man is an entirely self-defining individual, as the Existentialist claims he need be, then man alone is solely responsible for his existence. Even when characters blame or thank the gods, their acknowledgements actually reveal more of a human weakness, in this case dependency, than acknowledge a divine dominance. Blaming or praising external forces—in this case, the gods—only serves to validate a largely accepted Existential proposition (although Chapter Two will address Kierkegaard's divergence in thought) that Absolutes distract and deter, maybe even prevent altogether, man from being wholly free. Total responsibility means total freedom, which can't happen if Absolutes are perceived as the shapers of man. Man must live independent from and not in dependence of forces beyond himself. Only in living beyond that dependence, can he assume total responsibility and hence, total freedom for his being, all of which culminate in the face of death, as the subsequent chapters will explore.

But while the action a man takes must be entirely of his own doing, even most Existentialists realize it is not done in isolation. Consider Jean-Paul Sartre's words: "In fashioning myself, I fashion
man,”26 because all men are of the same starting shell. What happened to an other could just have well happened to the self, and vice-versa. Here, one’s choices determine not only who and what he is, but also how he believes everyone to be. When an individual acts by choosing a personal way of being, he is simultaneously, though implicitly, promoting a universal behavior. What the Existentialist recognized as paradoxically important, and what the post-modern man may be losing sight or control of, is what the ancient Greek civilization was founded upon: the individual is always both independent from and independence of others:

Archaic Greek culture is one in which everyone lives in terms of others, under the eyes and in the esteem of others, when the basis of a personality is confirmed by the extent to which its reputation is known; in such a context, real death lies in amnesia, silence, demeaning obscurity, the absence of fame. By contrast, real existence—for the living or the dead—comes from being recognized, valued, and honored.27

The Existential understanding of the relationship between self and other sounds equally complex in the words of the French Existentialist, Simone de Beauvoir: “He is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.”28 These sentiments sound particularly familiar to Fyodor Dostoevsky who

26 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 316.
27 Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 57.
28 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 7.
believed all are responsible to all, for all, whereas Nietzsche, the outlier, upheld the inverse: nobody is responsible to any, for any. Responsibility is always a matter of relationship.

Homer’s Greece, despite Vernant’s simplified generalization previously cited, is equally divided. The Iliad promotes a much more Dostoevskian outlook—Achilles’ dedication to the Achaeans, Paris’ to the Trojans—whereas the Odyssey plays out Nietzsche’s mindset—Odysseus’ focus on self, resulting in dead crew by the end of the journey. And in his journey for self, by self, to find self, Odysseus comes to embody Nietzsche’s concept of the Overman—a critical evolutionary milestone in the Story of man and the nature of cultural heroes, especially in light of the Singular transformation Kurzweil warns we stand on the brink of today: whereby technology instead of man may overcome humanity.

As true as these polar tensions are to the way the Iliad and Odyssey function, they likewise reflect an underlying recognition of the Existential movement:

In contrast to much of the philosophical tradition, which has sought to understand a human as a thing or an object of a particular sort (whether a mind or a body or some combination of the two), existentialists have characterized human existence as involving profound tension or conflict, an ongoing struggle between opposing elements.29

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29 Guignon and Pereboom, eds., Existentialism: Basic Writings, xvii.
And we have seen this already, namely in the tension between subjective and universal, independent and dependent, self and other. These oppositional tensions hearken back to the most fundamental nature of story, encapsulate the primary challenge of cyber living (in which the extremes are only stretching infinitely further as dictated by Moore’s Law), and define the natural state of being for the Greek warrior, as well: truth existing in both opposing qualities at once.

Consider these tensions in light of hubris, for example. Hubris, perhaps the most serious and most common flaw among Greek warriors, epitomizes self-importance, and yet is entirely dependent on one’s relationship to others: others are needed as a reference point in order for one to determine his self as greater than. Achilles, and later Odysseus—all humans for that matter—are capable of arrogance only in relation to others.

The tension defining duty seems equally paradoxical. Take Hector, for example, who makes the decision in Book VI to return to combat despite his wife’s begging to stay with her and his child at home. At first it may seem as though Hector’s decision is ruled by an external force, an inauthentic way to exist. But if we borrow Hegel’s premise as de Beauvoir did in her defense of ethics, then, “the essence of right and duty and the essence of the thinking and willing subject
are absolutely identical."\textsuperscript{30} Hector wills combat, and in doing so, fulfills his self-determining duty.

And according to de Beauvoir, balancing polarities even establishes individualized value systems: "the source of all values reside in the freedom of man,"\textsuperscript{31} not in a higher authority or divine source that predetermines these values for them. Hence, like many of her contemporaries who reject a world of Absolutes, so does she, too, reject the concept of a predetermined prototype or model for man to follow. In rejecting a prototype—as Beauvoir intimates and the Greeks will act out—man and the warriors are, first and foremost, celebrating the individual. Concurrently, each time man determines a value for himself, he is choosing that which he thinks man ought to be, bringing Sartre's words to fruition, "In choosing myself, I choose man," bringing us full circle in the prevailing paradoxes between the subjective and the universal, between will and duty, between self and other. The most successful hero, then, according to Existential principles, is, in part, the one who can establish and maintain these very balances of opposing tensions. But where are these tensions in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century? Or better yet, where is the balance?

\textsuperscript{30} Beauvoir, \textit{The Ethics of Ambiguity}, 17.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 15.
Overall, the most critical I/thou relationship for man in his quest to be hero of his own life is the one he establishes with death. Actually, one’s relationship with death may also represent the most complicated paradox of all, for death is really what one is constantly seeking in his advancement toward the future, and yet death is what one ought to be avoiding if he desires to continue existing. But most importantly, death, all the while, as previously explained, is the single most thing that one must always be confronting if he is to exist with any sense of meaning, purpose, or urgency. The ancient Greek and the Existential Man, not to mention the 21st century individual, seem to function in, among, and by way of death. In this way, the modern man exists much like the ancient warrior: amidst a battlefield draped in death, in nothingness, in the great void.

Death reminds us that we are not whole. The single day, September 11, 2001—and most recently, the December 14, 2012 school shooting massacre in Newtown, Connecticut—reawakened the American awareness of fragility, mortality, and nothingness in a similar way the World Wars did for the founding voices of Existentialism, and comparably to the culminating combats of the Trojan War on its Greek warriors and the ten-year voyage Odysseus journeyed on the vast open sea. In each case, it will be the direct confrontation of death that in some profound way defines the
individual's status and ultimately determines his corresponding levels of free and meaningful existence. Much of the remaining studies will, in fact, be focused on more closely examining various responses to death in order to better inform our own decisions in light of this nothingness.

But what do we mean by death? Most broadly speaking, death is the nothingness each life works towards, and existence is the nothingness each life begins as. Sartre put it this way: "Existence precedes essence." These words are both simple and profound in suggesting that each individual is born a shell, a hardcover case, leaving it entirely to each individual to script his or her own story, and to do so in the way he finds most appropriate or meaningful in each present moment. The Greek warriors wrote their story upon the battlefield; the Existential man in the here and now; and the Ryan Halligan's largely in cyberspace. One's narrative is always advancing toward death because it's all our lives have ever known. It's the only story we truly all share. And that is why to think of a world without death would complicate, challenge, perhaps even destroy all that we have ever known.

The ensuing studies will examine man's complex and necessary relationships with death—then and now—in an attempt to glean greater understanding about living meaningfully and freely today in a
society that seems even more fervently consumed by and devoted to death, but at the same time on the brink of transcending or eliminating it. Be it in a crusade to stop aging, to eliminate disease, to idolize youthfulness, to promote Pro-Choice, to picket gun laws, to pray for salvation—death is not merely at the end of existence, it seems to be the heart of it, just as Montaigne once proposed: “The continuous work of our life is to build death,” a sentiment Nietzsche echoed when he reflected, “The living is merely a type of what is dead,” mindsets each Homeric, particularly the Iliadic, hero seems to live out each day on the battlefield.

Yet while mortal man has found and continues to discover meaning in the face of death, he does not always experience confrontations in the same way. The Greek warrior, for example, does not merely happen upon death; rather, he actively seeks (and sometimes withdraws from) the physical encounter with the possibility of death each time he challenges and engages in personal combat, interactions that comprise the vast majority of the Iliad’s content (be it Paris’s dare in Book III, the bloody battles of Book V, Diomedes versus Glaucus in Book VI, Hector and Achilles in Book XXII). Even Odysseus reminds his peers of just how dishonorable it

32 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 7.

33 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 98.
would be to escape by sea because in doing so, one would turn his
back on and flee from death, from the most significant no-thingness
that all mortals must confront—advice that perhaps could have saved
Ryan Halligan from not merely confronting but giving into death,
committing one of the most serious Existential offenses: suicide.

**Branching Out**

The successive three chapters of this thesis build upon the
ancient-modern Existential correlations presented thus far in order to
more meaningful engage in a study of heroes. The fact that many of
the defining Existential voices actually spoke with explicit Classical
undertones about the freedom that is death seems to concretize a way
of engagement the ancient Greek heroes act out. It is almost as if
these warriors knew what the Existentialists would later articulate,
and what the post-modern man has perhaps lost sight of: only through
a direct confrontation with death, with no-thing, can a man truly
experience freedom. Perhaps then, there is a new way to revisit,
interpret, and learn from the Greek warriors’ reality in which they are
not “oppressed by the future even when they know that it holds
approaching doom.”

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34 E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of
The epic characters choose to relate themselves to death in a range of ways—from pursuing to resigning to fleeing—and as a result, each experiences different levels of freedom and meaning—a correlation to be more closely examined in subsequent chapters. These life-defining relationships with death compare to the Danish Existentialist, Soren Kierkegaard's modes of existing, a complex study of relationships that establish the framework for the following chapters' examination.

Each chapter of this study works according to the premise that the heroes of these two epics were, in essence, responding to similar problems, questions, and needs of existing that the Existentialists, many centuries later, formulated in a vast array of ideologies and beliefs, many of which contradict each other.

Perhaps, by revisiting these very early stories of the Western narrative in light of the Existential theories, we might glean some greater awareness about how to endure the forthcoming evolutions, as we move to a more digital existence, perhaps on the brink of Singularity. I contend that the Existential predicament of ancient and modern day is ever more relevant and complex today in light of our new layer of concern: How does an evolved species begin to respond meaningful to the enduring problem of existing?
At the same time, and perhaps most significant, is the reality that our virtual age, combined with profound medical advancements, is leading man closer to existing in a universe without death. Because so much of the ancient and Existential existence was rooted in and reliant upon man’s various relationships to death—relationships that will be closely analyzed in the forthcoming chapters—it is precisely these two Stories—that of ancient Greece and of Existential man—that may help us better understand the impact of a potential deathless existence.

And what this research and Existential reading of the Greek epics may most meaningfully be culminating in is actually a question of ethical behavior. As Simone de Beauvoir once wrote in her critique of ethics, “There is an ethics only if there is a problem to solve.” And what is death but the greatest problem man has attempted to solve? If man eliminates the “problem” of death, does he not also diminish the ethical realm?

Or “by beating death, will [we] have lost our essential humanity?”

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CHAPTER 2

THE ILIADIC HEROES ENCOUNTER DEATH:
MAN'S LEAP FOR FREEDOM

Freedom is what we do with what is done to us.
—John Paul Sartre

Death-Defining Life

We have already established that entering into existence, especially as seemingly objective and absurd as our current one, presents each human being with the fundamental problem of being “cut off” while at the same time, needing to connect in order to make meaning, to create essence. Hence, each individual must decide how to respond to the predicament—perhaps the problem—of existing; he must engage in scripting his narrative.

This problem, and therefore the story, both begins and culminates in the question of death.

Death and existence define each other. The name of the promise of life is death and one must trust it, must confront it, must deal with it intimately so that one may live\textsuperscript{1}: “When I make it my goal to have lived... I live with death before me and behind me. Death before me is

\textsuperscript{1} Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
the death I hope for, that of a life already lived; death behind me is the
dead I fear, that of a life not yet lived.”

In order to expound upon just how critical an individual’s
relationship to death is, consider what exactly death represents: the
eternal reminder that man—that mortal man—is not whole. In order
“to break the spell of death [man] must embrace a finite existence,”
and the fact that time—particularly the Western notion of it—is the
most limited of resources, constantly advancing, constantly coming to
a new end, man is constantly dealing with the reality of death, a
reality that reveals itself in a question, namely, a question of freedom.

Yes, death is a question of freedom and death must always
remain a question, a perspective Nietzsche assumes, a perspective
that is most aligned with Homer’s in the Iliad. For once death
becomes the answer—as it did for Ryan Halligan—the individual
ceases to have control, to have life, to have the opportunity to choose
one self and in doing so, to choose freedom.

Perhaps counterintuitive to the rational mind, death offers a
freedom that is life. As radical as this might have been for
Existentialists on which to ground their life-view, it is not necessarily

\(^2\) Donne, Time and Myth, 2.

\(^3\) Ibid., 20.

\(^4\) Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
a new way of being. This treatment of death, in fact, marks yet another aspect of Antiquity's renaissance through Existentialism, even becoming a cornerstone of most Existential philosophy. Its dualistic nature as a force of power—with a capacity to both empower and strip of power—is addressed over the course of both epics, in differing but complimentary ways. Pucci has provided the following summary in relation to this idea: "The Iliad is the poem of total expenditure of life and the Odyssey is the poem of a controlled economy of life." As such, the Iliad extols death as empowering, whereas the Odyssey does just the opposite. And just how does each response to death contribute to the individual's existence and heroic stature? This chapter will consider in light of the Iliad; Chapter Three will do so in terms of the Odyssey.

The Iliad celebrates death, and this chapter will engage in analytic reading to consider exactly how and to what end it, in fact, does. Vernant, in his article entitled "A 'Beautiful Death' and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic," makes explicit the Greek formula—or rather, the Illiadic one—according to which a warrior achieves status of hero. And the main ingredient is death. If it follows that the warrior's prime focus is to attain glory so as to attribute

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meaning to his existence, and that glory can only be attained through a beautiful death, it can be deduced that death is the only means by which one can pursue meaning, and through meaning, freedom:

"Death is overcome when it is made welcome instead of merely being experienced, and when it makes life a perpetual gamble,"\(^6\) as it does for Agamemnon, Achilles, and Hector, as we will examine shortly.

**Responding to Death: Realms of Existence**

In part because the epic warriors seemed to exist with similar fundamental questions of purpose and existence, we will engage in a study of the Iliadic heroes based on an Existential evaluation system, namely that of Kierkegaard’s three realms of being: 1) the aesthetical, 2) the ethical, and 3) the religious. Each sphere is a response to existing, and therefore, an approach to self-realization which means it is also a way of confronting death:

A man’s very despair in the face of death is a sign of spirit, a sign that he does not merely die but has a relationship to his own death. So, too, his hope and his quest of life are signs that he does not merely live but has a relationship to his own life.\(^7\)

This relationship creates essence, and for the Greek warrior, these relationships evolve on the battlefield, for “in combat the hero reaches beyond himself and promises himself greatness; he makes himself by

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\(^6\) Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 57.

\(^7\) Donne, *Time and Myth*, 14.
asserting himself.”⁸ These words of the Greek scholar Redfield hearken back to those of Sartre’s, cited in the Introductory chapter when he admits: “I am not myself and can never be myself, because my being stretching out beyond itself at any given moment exceeds itself. I am always simultaneously more and less than I am.”⁹ This matter of extension must be reconciled, especially in our age of crossing over into the virtual realm. And it is neither a simple nor straightforward issue, and man is not always successful in doing so as we will have seen with Ryan Halligan and as we will see with the Iliadic heroes when evaluated according to the Kierkegaardian modes of existence.

Kierkegaard’s proposed system provides a way into this complex situation. At very much the core of Kierkegaard’s proposition is the recognition of the divided self. His language of the individual as fragmented echoes the fundamental problem of existing we have already established in terms of both the Existentialist and the 21st century man. Perhaps it is a state so fundamental to being human, it is also the reason we can recognize it in the Greek warrior, as well, as we will shortly consider.

That said, perhaps what is, in part, new in terms of the Kierkegaardian dialogue is the consideration of what exactly divides

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man, or rather, what man is divided among. Kierkegaard proposes that man is split between a finite self and an eternal being. Up to this point in our studies, the primary focus of the notion of time has, in fact, been on the here and now, the present, the moment in which we are most immediately immersed. Kierkegaard’s notion of the eternal, on one hand, should not be surprising in that he is one of the few and the most notable religious Existentialists; he not only acknowledges a transcendent nature of being, he will come to value it as much as he does the finite side.

It is also his recognition of an eternal side that makes his framework an appropriate one for these studies. While our 21st century society may be considered less religious in the traditional sense than it has ever been, it seems increasingly more aware, if not concerned, about the spiritual side of things. And even those who are not spiritual, experience in the stretching beyond oneself through the virtual realm of existence, perhaps a perverted, but nonetheless somewhat analogous notion to the eternal.

Our existence, Kierkegaard maintains, must be “a synthesis of the temporal and the eternal;” hence, we need a “unifying structure” which can only come about through a “decisive, continuously renewed
choice,” a choice he names the “leap.”\textsuperscript{10} This leap, as we will see, is meant to be an act of commitment to an other, and here, once again, it seems, the paradoxical nature of freedom surfaces: we need others in order to unify the self. “Only the person who aims to attain unity in this way,” he’ll claim, “can properly be called an existing individual.”\textsuperscript{11} the ultimate goal for all human beings.

For the Greek hero striving towards a beautiful death, his leap must occur when he is at his youthful peak. So, too, does the “heroic death seize the fighter when he is at his acme.”\textsuperscript{12} Vernant explains, “the kleos apdhiton (renown, glory) the hero gains through his early death also opens to him the path of eternal youth,”\textsuperscript{13} a different language which communicates an existential essence of death bringing life. Concurrently, death also seems to bring the two divided parts of self together, for the beautiful death:

\dots guarantees unassailable renown to the man who has given his life for his refusal to be dishonored in battle, or to be shamed as a coward. A beautiful death is also a glorious death (euklees thantaos). For all time to come, it elevates the fallen warrior to a state of glory; and the luster of this celebrity, this kleos, that henceforth surrounds his name and person is the ultimate accolade that represents his greatest accomplishment.

\textsuperscript{10} Guignon and Pereboom, Existentialism: Basic Writings, 7.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 60.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
the winning of *arête* . . . excellence is actualized all at once and forever after in the deed that puts an end to the hero’s life.\textsuperscript{14}

In this way, the beautiful death seems to provide the unification of self Kierkegaard describes: the same moment that ends the finite life makes possible the state of eternal glory. Glory only through death.

Each of Kierkegaard’s three stages is self-contained, a complete worldview in and of itself. Taken together, however, these three stages establish a hierarchy in which one must actually progress through the first stage—the aesthetical—in order to graduate to the second stage—the ethical—which is the only course by which to arrive at the third, the final, the pinnacle—the religious stage. Because the only way to rise within the hierarchy is to commit to an *other*, and because this commitment to *other* is inherently tied to personal freedom, there is a direct correlation between one’s place in hierarchy and one’s level of freedom.

Using this Existential criteria, we can revisit the common notions of *hero* as they pertain to the *Iliad* in hopes of garnering new insight and raising new inquiries for the larger consideration of how to more meaningfully craft our own narrative of existence.

\textsuperscript{14} Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, 51.
The Aesthetic

From the Greek *aisthetes*, meaning "to perceive, to feel;"\(^{15}\) the first, most primal stage of being spends his existence indulging his senses in immediate pleasure. As is the case with Agamemnon. Agamemnon—the Aesthetic—is largely self-serving in his attraction to those entities which offer pleasure and beauty, chiefly those of the sensual kind. For Agamemnon, this pleasure is actualized through his *geras*, Chryseis, whom the warrior prefers to his own wife in terms of "looks, body, mind [and] ability."\(^{16}\) Agamemnon is consumed by his desire for his due prize, and if he must—as he must—return his awarded *geras*, then he "want[s] another prize ready for [him] right away"\(^{17}\) to fill the pleasure void, to satiate the desire, to grant him immediate satisfaction. His immediate need to fill the consequential void, his refusal to "be the only Greek without a prize,"\(^{18}\) and his ultimate taking of Achilles’ *geras*, all attest to his pleasure-seeking motivations defining his being.

In true aesthetic form, Agamemnon pursues “satisfaction with the immediate, with whatever is arbitrarily chosen as an object of


\(^{16}\) Homer *Iliad* I.120-1.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., I.126.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., I.127.
immediate concern,”¹⁹ in this case, of obtaining that which he wants. It is Achilles who best articulates Agamemnon’s aesthetical existing: “His mind is murky . . . he doesn’t have the sense to look ahead and behind to see . . . .”²⁰ His insular focus keeps Agamemnon from being in control of his own self; instead, it is pleasure that holds the reigns, seldom guiding him beyond the aesthetic realm, forever binding him to the fleeting moment of the present and the ephemeral satisfaction of the pleasure. The only death Agamemnon faces in these moments is that of each pleasure as it is experienced or taken away. This shallow relationship to death contributes to a surfaced development of self and inability to experience freedom, as he is always depending on the next form of pleasure.

However, by the same token, Agamemnon is entirely immersed in the present. And at first, this embracement of the here and now seems both Existential and contemporary in essence. And perhaps it is, and perhaps that raises an important point of ambiguity that needs reconciling in the quest for the most meaningful engagement with life, especially nowadays. After all, “success in the aesthetic life... is depending on fortune.”²¹ And fortune is fickle, it comes and goes;

²⁰ Homer Iliad 1.354-7.
pleasure is ephemeral; and so this form of existing denies the eternal
prospect of being and makes the present but a fleeting sensation.

Not to mention that in defining one’s existence by way of
fortune, of objects providing sensual pleasure, Agamemnon and all
Aesthetics, come to define their selves through short-lived, inconstant
relationships to external objects. And a freedom constructed in this
way is wrought with bondage. For without those conditionals, the
individual would cease to have his own meaning of being, not mention
freedom.

Agamemnon, however, has a redeeming experience that suggests
perhaps some chance to evolve and engage more authentically, and his
motivation behind returning Chryseis speaks to such a point. In
sending her back so as to do “that’s what’s best,”22 “for the sake of the
common good”23 to relieve his death-inflicted camp of “the gods’
arrows,”24 he acts, if but only momentarily, according to the
motivations of obligation, of Kierkegaard’s second realm. To graduate
to the ethical realm, one must act according to a sense of duty rather
than to either a feeling of desire (as with the motivations of the


22 Homer *Iliad* I.124


24 Homer *Iliad* I.61.
aesthetic) or a striving toward meaning (as with the motivations of the religious).

Achilles also strives to preserve his geras, and for many of the same reasons Agamemnon does. At the most basic level, Achilles desires the girl. But more than any physical or sensual delight she may offer, Achilles desires the glory and honor and kleos she emblematizes. And herein lies one crucial distinction between these two warriors, particularly as they concern the Kierkegaardian modes of existing. Striving to achieve glory acknowledges to some extent, consciously or not, the eternal side of being. Glory endures; pleasures do not, and Achilles is motivated by that which will last beyond his own temporal existence.

Not only does Achilles desire glory, but he also "sees a sharp division between two kinds of glory"\(^{25}\): ordinary time and extraordinary time. The former refers to "public esteem" whereas the latter is "eternal glory," and he will ultimately earn both, a feat of sorts that, in ancient terms, suggests a certain merging of the two selves Kierkegaard identified.

Eventually, tensions arise as Agamemnon not only receives a greater, grander geras than Achilles, the war hero, but even more so as Agamemnon threatens to:

\(^{25}\) Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 55.
... take away the prize
that [he] sweated for and the Greeks gave [him],26
an act which "denies [Achilles'] preeminence in battle, the very heroic
quality that everyone concede to him."27 And so, Agamemnon "take[s]
away [his] prize and dishonors [him]."28

Here, Achilles seems to appease Agamemnon by acting according
to his own sense of duty. These societal obligations, in which one is
aware of the necessary commitment to one's self and/or to others,
serve as the motivating factors for acting within the realm of The
Ethical. Achilles, at best, lingers on the brink of taking that leap to
unify his divided self.

But Achilles' teeters. His ultimate decision to remove himself
from the action returns him to the Aesthetic Stage, though at the
highest tier of it, denoting him an intellectual aesthete: "one who
attempts to stand outside life and view it as a detached spectator."29
His existential inclination to remove the self into a state of isolation is
another way of considering his slight elevation toward a freer
existence. And yet, without that active choice to commit, to leap, he

26 Homer Iliad I.170-1.
27 Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 53.
28 Homer Iliad I.370.
29 Morgan, Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, 233.
is bound to live out an unsuccessful existence. Existing as a completely detached individual is as seriously problematic as its antithesis: wholly immersed in the fleeting moment; the balance of these two tensions is imperative for a successful existence, or so Kierkegaard contends.

Kierkegaard might explain the motivation for Achilles' self-alienation as an attempt to avoid his own mortality, quite literally in the physical retreat from battle, which is the perpetual potential for death. If so, perhaps this explains why he is not yet the hero history has always wanted and legend has always made him to be. Maybe it is why he is not in the hero we need in constructing our own sense of self today. As Achilles is a great war hero, he is supposed to, expected to die in battle, and so by removing himself from battle, he takes himself as much out of his societal role as he does out of death's path—a path necessary to travel to create meaning, to reach glory, to choose thyself.

Instead of confronting, Achilles retreats, both on a physical and subconscious level. He proceeds to "sleep in an inner alcove," physically isolated and symbolically residing in a self-created world. But in isolating himself, he faces the possibility of what Existentialists deem "boredom," a state of consciousness ephemerally avoided.

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\(^{30}\) Homer *Iliad* IX.684-5.
through what Kierkegaard calls “The Rotation Method” whereby one—in this case, Achilles—creates his own world that may offer the pleasure he seeks, but not the authenticity he needs. Achilles “pluck[s] clear notes on a lyre,” indulges in storytelling and “[sings] the glories of heroes in war,” perhaps beginning to create the narrative of his being, but all too removed from the reality of existing at this point in time to be successful in doing so.

**The Ethical**

Achilles spends most of the epic in perpetual flux, traveling the extremes instead of balancing them. He plays a myriad of roles: from rage-filled victor to dutiful responder to self-alienated warrior. From the heat of battle to the verge of returning home and ultimately to personally confront death, Achilles grows, or rather graduates to a more meaningful existence, primarily through his confrontation with death.

Achilles will ultimately die at battle, unlike Agamemnon who, having never directly encountered death in the *Iliad*, again, falls seriously short of heroic virtue and meaningful existence. Vernant explains this necessity to recognize life as ephemeral in order to devote oneself “completely and single-mindedly to war, adventure,

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31 Ibid., IX.190, 193-4.
glory, and death.”\textsuperscript{32} And it is this lifestyle, attributed to Achilles more than to Agamemnon, that understands heroic honor as “all or nothing” which “operates outside of and beyond hierarchies of rank,”\textsuperscript{33} whereas it is only rank, namely his rank as king, which Agamemnon can understand. He demands “ordinary time,”\textsuperscript{34} public esteem due to him solely on his status as king. He relies on others; he fails to focus on that which is his own, personal existence.

Achilles graduates to the next stage by making a leap to—in Kierkegaardian terms—“choose thyself.” But he cannot do it alone. As laid out in the previous chapters, and as Kierkegaard’s theory will underscore, existing begins and revolves around the individual, but inevitably involves relationship. As Existentialism conveys, and this particular example from Homer’s epic illustrates, each mode of living presents a complicated necessity of relationship underlying individual meaning. Kierkegaard will therefore classify marriage as a sign of this commitment. While Achilles is not married, he does, in fact, commit himself wholeheartedly to another, in this case, to his fallen friend, Patroclus.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{32} Vernant, Mortals and Immortals, 53.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 54.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 55.
\end{itemize}
In order to choose a new self, Achilles must lose his old self—a process that begins as he literally takes off his armor, symbolically shedding his self, for the sake of both his self and an other. Perhaps Achilles becomes rage-filled and committed because he recognizes that what occurred to Patroclus could have just as easily occurred to him; and in a way, it did since Patroclus was wearing his armor.

In this case, the critical moment—the leap—occurs in large part because he commits to Patroclus, symbolized by his giving of armor. And vice-versa: the leap is followed through out of a sense of duty to avenge the death of this same other. Here, other is both the cause and consequence, the question and the answer, the reason to and the reason by which he commits. And this leap revolves entirely around death: it is catalyzed by death (Patroclus'), it seeks a new death in response (Hector's), and all the while, it requires risking one's own death (Achilles'). Achilles needs Patroclus to die who needed Hector to kill him so that Achilles can face death. Achilles laments,

I loved him,
And I killed him,”

a confession steeped in existential ideology and echoed at a later point by Thetis who warns Achilles that “Hector's death means yours

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35 Homer Iliad XVIII.84-5.
[Achilles].”\textsuperscript{36} As Vernant articulates, so too, is “Archaic Greek culture...one in which everyone lives in terms of others.”\textsuperscript{37} Or in Dostoevsky’s voice, “I cannot decide anything about myself except for in relation to someone else”—that is to say that one’s identity is one’s decision he makes in how to relate his own identity to the identity of others.\textsuperscript{38} Or in Sartrean terms, it is a matter of total responsibility in total solitude. “My freedom is the death of your freedom; your freedom is the death of my freedom.”\textsuperscript{39} If, in fact, this mindset rings true, then what are the implications for the 21st century man and his struggle to be free?

Maybe it is in the moment of despair as it was for Achilles and as Kierkegaard may have predicted.\textsuperscript{40} Achilles experiences this anguish when another form of his pleasure, his friendship with Patroclus, ends. When Achilles does finally return to the battleground, he is more active in his pursuit than ever before. He is alone in his fight for revenge. While his troops eat and strategize, he urges them not to

\textsuperscript{36} Homer \textit{Iliad} XVIII.101.
\textsuperscript{37} Vernant, \textit{Mortals and Immortals}, 57.
\textsuperscript{38} Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} Morgan, \textit{Modern and Contemporary Philosophy}, 233.
“waste any more time with speeches” for they “have work to do;” talk will not suffice; actions trump. In order for his warrior status to assume meaning, he must choose to make the decision to face death once again.

In the free choice to commit himself to the other—both Patroclus and death itself—Achilles graduates by way of balancing his roles as passive and active agent, as status-filler and decision-maker, seek public esteem and personal meaning, focusing on outward appearance and reflecting on inward essence. He moves from being a life that is existing to bringing his existence alive. He evolves to the Ethical Phase.

But if the great war hero, Achilles, does not advance beyond the ethical stage, is there anyone in the Iliad who can be considered a hero? According to Kierkegaardian standards, Hector is that man.

The Religious

Although we do not experience Hector’s transcendence of the aesthetic to the ethical stage, we must infer it occurs prior to our story’s beginning in medias res since one must travel each phase in order to arrive at the next one. And when we meet Hector, he is already acting according to the ethical stage including being married

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41 Homer Iliad XIX.163-4.
but leaving his wife to fulfill his duties to his polis. We do witness, then, his transcendence to the highest stage, the religious.

It is in and through Hector’s encounter with death, as it is with all individual beings, that the meaning of life and the freedom of existing reach their pinnacle in the third sphere. In rising, the individual “chooses to believe in the existential primacy of the individual” to recognize that “the individual ultimately is higher than the universal” because the latter “cannot completely account for the individual human being.”42 Hector acts more for himself than for Achilles, who acts dutifully according to the warriors’ code to avenge his comrade’s death. Hence, Hector will ultimately choose actions that graduate him to the realm of the religious, in acknowledgment that he, “as a real individual, can never be totally defined by nor encompassed under a universal rule.”43 But his story is also one of evolution.

Divided between obligation to family and loyalty to polis, it seems, at first, Hector dwells largely in the ethical sphere. But Hector’s break from the ethical is experienced with “fear and trembling.”44 Even though this evolution of being is fluid, we might isolate a single experience as being more climatic than others—that is

42 Morgan, Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, 235.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., 236.
the interior monologue in his moment of isolated deliberation just prior to fighting Achilles. His final soliloquy in the *Iliad* occurs in the thick of battle, instants before engaging in a final hand-to-hand combat. Even the stylistic choice to include a soliloquy at this moment, a speech in isolation in which an individual turns inward and self-reflects, suggests greater movement toward self-actualization.

Hector’s speech-act removes him, if only but for a moment, from the immediacy of death. This momentary pause puts him in isolation, and only in isolation can he confront the insecurities, the fears, the innermost desires he holds within; or perhaps it is because he is momentarily isolated, he experiences fear and insecurity. Either way, Hector is deeply engaged in a moment of reflective probing and self-discovery. Inherent in this process is also self-doubt, a reminder of one’s own human fragility and mortal frailty, a necessary awakening in the pursuit of freedom. Perhaps, in this way, the moment offers the reader an opportunity to follow suit and also remove this warrior from the battlefield and consider him the fragile human man—vulnerable and divided—that he truly is beneath the armor.

Hector finds himself divided among and between the fight he ought to engage in and the opportunity to withdraw. And for Kierkegaard, the “decisive encounter with the Self lies in the
Either/Or of choice.”\textsuperscript{45} His first option is to hide, to defy the call of the warrior to risk his life in combat for fear of being “reproach[ed]” by Polydamas, recognizing his own faults at work having “destroyed half the army through [his] recklessness,”\textsuperscript{46} and yet, he cannot accept the potential outcome of “surrender[ing] Helen and everything to Paris brought back with her” and “share it all equally.”\textsuperscript{47} He must engage.

Even before we consider the significance of the choice he ends up making, the very fact that he hesitates and deliberates at this, his most intimate confrontation with death, is surely significant. We are reminded yet again of human frailness and inherent fear of death—the most perplexing question of being. Had Hector just responded and reacted, he would have been more of a passive agent playing out a conditioned response. What an Existential problem, particularly for the man of faith, to not make the conscious decision to commit, to choose, to \textit{act}. Hence, the fear and trembling in response to the possibility of death makes a committed choice—not to mention a leap to faith—possible.

\textsuperscript{45} Barrett, \textit{Irrational Man}, 162.

\textsuperscript{46} Homer \textit{Iliad} XXII.130-6.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.
And Hector comes to this recognition about midway through his death-deliberating soliloquy, in a moment of direct confrontation with the self: “[But] why am I talking to myself like this?” A rather odd question, but a crucial one in his quest to better understand—and therefore take responsibility for—his own actions. And it is in this moment that the warrior questions his questioning in the first place. It is as if he knows what he needs to do from the very beginning, and yet he momentarily seeks some alternative course of action.

But now, in this moment of clarity, the warrior seems to imply he knows what he always knew: that to face potential death is to do right not just as a warrior, but as an existing individual. It is to commit oneself to a greater purpose beyond one’s self, and in doing so, to choose thyself.

According to Kierkegaard, “choosing decisively” means choosing “for a lifetime, and therefore for eternity since only one life is given us.” Choosing, then, is to unite the divided self. It is to become a hero. It is the final resolve of his speech that he recognizes the power of action over words:

This is not time
for talking. . . .

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48 Homer *Iliad* XXII.139.

Better to lock up in mortal combat.”

While the Greek scholar Redfield will classify this choice—the decision not to withdraw his troops—his ultimate “error,” the Existentialist would recognize the decision as his last and final leap, success. Redfield recognized this perceived error to occur in a series of events in which Hector becomes “gradually more isolated and more self-willed,” the very qualities towards which an Existentialist strives and the knight of faith must embody. He will also conclude that “more than anywhere else in the poem,” these so-called errors “are determined by Hector’s free choice . . . . He gives himself over to the situation, and he changes.” Whether or not the choices are errors may depend on perspective, but the fact that he “commits himself to it and becomes the instrument of his own determination” is the point of critical agreement, and ultimately works towards recognizing him as the Knight of Faith.

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50 Homer Iliad XXII.141-2, 146.
51 Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad, 128.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 142.
54 Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad, 143.
The moment Hector “hear[s] the gods calling [him] to [his] death,” when “death is closing in” and “there’s no escape,” he experiences what Kierkegaard calls dread: the moment for any knight of faith of needing to decide between clinging to a rock and jumping into an abyss, for him between fighting out of duty versus fighting for himself. It is the latter, a leap to faith, when acted upon, that advances him into the third tier of existential living. “Then let me die now,” he resolves:

As for my own fate,  
I’ll accept it whenever it pleases Zeus . . .  
If it is true that I have a fate like [Heracles], then I too Will lie down in death.  
But now to win glory.”

In moving from deliberation to action, Hector “must rely on hope” and “this hope . . . is a form of self-reliance,” a form of what Kierkegaard may have named faith.

And the leap to faith always occurs in a moment of unlikeliness or ambivalence. Athena helps to create this type of scenario. Just as he is about to engage, he is abandoned by Athena when he needs her and the weapon she has to offer most. He is ever more alone, in an objective and absurd universe, and still he is willing to say yes. He

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55 Homer Iliad XXII.333.
56 Ibid., XVIII.122-130.
57 Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad, 145.
feels the Satrean anguish that arises out of a given situation in which
the individual feels “entirely unequal to the task of prescribed”58 yet
chooses not to avoid the task. Hector is praised by Glaucus for “laying
it all on the line,”59 for taking the leap. He embodies his freedom by
his willingness to risk; it is a moment “in which he isolates himself”
and as such, “a moment of great vulnerability.”60 He says “Amen” and
becomes what Nietzsche deems the “yes-sayer”: he who says yes and
only yes to what can and cannot be otherwise.61 He is Kierkegaard’s
knight of faith.

Hector embraces that which Agamemnon tries to evade: personal
I do? God’s decide everything.”62 Even though it is true that Hector
and Achilles recognize the presence and dealings of the gods, they do
not use it either as an excuse or as reason to withhold from acting on
their own accord. They do not hold them as Absolutes. Achilles even
retorts, “I don’t need [anyone] to prophesy my death... I know in my

58 Morgan, Modern and Contemporary Philosophy, 394.
59 Homer Iliad XVII.156.
60 Redfield, Nature and Culture in the Iliad, 147.
61 Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
62 Homer Iliad XIX.103.
bones I will die here . . . Still, I won’t stop . . . .”63 No truer words were thought by the Existential thinkers themselves.

Whereas Achilles acts by his own sense of duty, Hector seems to recognize both his own inferiority to Achilles, “I know you’re really good, a lot better than me,” and his own subordination to the gods:

It is up to [them] whether I’m
A lesser man, will rob you of life.”64

And yet he proceeds. He will act out of faith, and in doing so, the act will be entirely of his own free choice. One can argue, due mainly to these two factors—his inferiority and subordination—that Hector takes the greater risk in this pursuit. Existentially speaking, then, he demonstrates the greater faith: “The notion that one can maintain an attitude of resignation toward something and at the same time an attitude of accepting it back is the most central idea in Kierkegaard’s conception of faith.”65 Hector “wait[s] for death,”66 and upon meeting it, he experiences the dread, the anxiety but leaps all the same, or perhaps, exactly because—he needs to be free.

Hector may just be the hero we need in today’s evolving world, and the question of what it entails to be more like him—namely, to act

63 Homer Iliad XIX.449-451.
64 Ibid., XX.448, 450.
65 Guignon and Pereboom, Existentialism: Basic Writings, 15.
66 Homer Iliad XXII.9.
according to faith—will be more closely considered in the concluding chapter of these studies.

But first, there is one more epic hero yet to consider—a hero who survives not in the confrontation with death, but in his ability to elude it: Odysseus.
CHAPTER 3

THE ODYSSEAN HERO ENCOUNTERS DEATH: MAN’S WILL TO POWER

Now our encounter with death turns us around toward mortal existence again; we have to learn how it is lived; we have a journey to go reach it. A man who has encountered death may have to learn to live again. He is like a man who has had a stroke, who has to learn again to walk and talk.

- John Dunne

Same But Different

Just as there is no single way to define Existentialism, Homer’s treatment of existence cannot be accurately understood through the reading of just one epic. In fact, it is only when considered together that the two epics span the breadth of the polarities that define so much of Existential thought and meaningful existence.

For example, whereas freedom for the Iliad is defined by the protagonist’s ability to face, accept, and pursue death, it is for the Odyssey the hero’s ability to commit oneself to cheat, escape, and elude death. And whereas the Iliadic hero is the one who focuses on making a name for himself, the Odyssean hero is the one capable of losing his identity, hiding his name, becoming a no one, and in both cases, doing so for the sake of self-actualizing. And so it works with Pucci’s hypothesis that “the Iliad is the poem of total expenditure of
life and the *Odyssey* is the poem of a controlled economy of life,"¹ a contention whose inverse reads the *Iliad* as the poem of the profits of death and the *Odyssey* as the poem of its bankruptcies. It follows then, that if one's goal is to die young (as with the "beautiful deaths" of some Iliadic warriors), he can risk to be extravagant, whereas, if one's death is to be avoided (as will be the case with Odysseus), then one must endure and hoard what one has for later.

In light of Pucci's premise, it also follows that if the heroes of the *Iliad* find meaning through death, then, inversely, the hero of the *Odyssey* must find meaning through life. The underlying irony in all of this is that Odysseus is not the central hero of the *Iliad* because he does not die, and yet it is because he does not die in the *Odyssey* (at least not in the literal, physical sense), that he can become the central hero of the *Odyssey*. And as this chapter will set out to show, he may become the finest of the epic heroes. Yet, to complicate things even further, even though he does not die in the *Odyssey*, he does, most certainly, experience death—a meaningful paradox examined throughout the following pages.

The fact is, Odysseus regularly engages in a complex and dynamic relationship to death throughout his ten-year trek home: He

¹ Buchan, *The Limits of Heroism*, 133.
repeatedly meets and cheats and welcomes it when necessary, all in the process of reclaiming his name, a symbolic manifestation of finding his place, of making the connection he needs in order to be the existential individual he wants to be.

Odysseus exists in a world, much like that of the Iliadic warrior—much like of each of us—a world terribly death-ridden, in many ways beyond the literal sense of the word. For Odysseus, death is the fact that he does not recognize Ithaca upon his return; death is that his home is infested, his kingdom overrun by suitors; death is that his baby son is all grown up; death is his aged wife that no longer recognizes him. Death is his return, for return to the way things were is impossible; the past is dead. Death is having to enact the ritual, yet again, of becoming a nobody, of wiping the slate clean, in order to perform new actions to define a new self. So Odysseus returns in a disguise, named only "the beggar" (a title defined by the deeds of the person), and slays the suitors one by one. Finally, he makes himself the powerful Odysseus, ruler and father, husband and king we had only glimpses of hearing about in stories. Odysseus' journey is not meant to return him to the past, but to define him in the moment—an essence that only death makes possible.
Odysseus’ self-creating journey takes the longest of all the epic heroes perhaps because he does not risk a beautiful death at war, and he knows if he cannot earn glory in battle, his only other way to achieve a heroic status of eternal significance is to return home—hence his monologue in Book V. Even in spite of all that he has done, all of the actions he has taken prior to his return, his existence lacks meaning, his self lacks essence, his face lacks identity—all of which is symbolized by two key points: he often lacks a name/identity throughout the epic, and he often wanders as a stranger, adrift at sea or disguised on land. Here marks two notably identifiable characteristics of this ancient hero for the modern man, making him a strong contender for the hero with whom we may most identify, and therefore most need in this day and age.

**Kierkegaard Revisited**

On the one hand, we could begin our study of Odysseus in the same way this study has treated the Iliadic heroes: according to the Kierkegaardian spheres of existing. In fact, it seems logical to do just that.

When we first meet Odysseus in Book V, he is trapped on Calypso’s island. While he indulges in sensual pleasures each night with the nymph, by day he sits on a rock and weeps. He weeps for his wife, for his son, for a sense of duty to his palace and people in Ithaca.
Whatever pleasure he derives from his bed-sharing with Calypso on an aesthetic level is vanished by daybreak as he is reminded of his ethical obligations to family and kingdom. And the result is despair.

Eventually Odysseus’ sense of commitment to family and state will lead him off the island and on a perilous trek home. But his graduation to the ethical phase is not always constant. We see him give into temptations of delight along the way, but ultimately, his sense of duty drives him to Ithaca.

Although Odysseus’ journey culminates in a crisis of faith the night he returns to the suitors, he falls into an earthly state of despair at the very thought of Penelope’s potential infidelity, a fear he knows he is guilty of himself. In essence, he does not quite show signs of Kierkegaard’s knight of faith; he does not surrender his self to trust in forces beyond himself. But he continues to evolve, nonetheless, as the succeeding section will demonstrate.

Hence, a Kierkegaardian evaluation Odysseus as a hero might very well end there. But perhaps Kierkegaard’s worldview is deficient, or at the very least, incomplete; after all, these stages are only lived out in the Iliad, only one part—one half of the whole. The Odyssey and eponymous hero complete the narrative, and arguably connect man in a way even more meaningfully to the Story. There is much more to the man that Odysseus makes of himself, and just
exactly how he creates his self speaks more to the way Nietzsche’s Overman exists than to Kierkegaard’s Knight of Faith, or so I will contend.

Perhaps it is because “the man of faith, the believer, is necessarily a small type of man,” Nietzsche suggests, and “hence, ‘freedom of spirit’ i.e., unbelief as an instinct is a precondition of greatness.” Nietzsche’s contends that the very concept of a Christian God precludes or suppresses man’s more natural inclination to will to power, a notion that culminates in his response to being: the Ubermensch. This concept of an Overman actually hearkens back to the early Greeks, “before either Christianity of science had put its blight upon the healthiness of man’s instincts.” Acting according to a faith in other, as opposed to a trust in one’s self, is a less authentic, less free way to exist, according to Nietzsche. Hence, man must act to overcome his own being for, by, and through his self-made choices.

The Original Overman

In this way, though, the two Existential voices of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche do seem to agree that the greatest essence of being in some way involves an expression of transcendence, but for Nietzsche, it culminates in self-transcendence, in overcoming the self. For only in

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2 Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy*, 79.

overcoming the self, can a man truly belong to himself, as is the case with Nietzsche’s own Ubermensch—the superman, the over-man. This Overman is not meant to replace God, but rather to present a new goal for humanity: to create a personal morality by which to govern one’s existence.

And at the heart of the journey to overcome one’s self, Nietzsche argues, is man’s instinct or will to power: “the power to create oneself by overcoming those obstacles that would stand in the way of self-realization.” And this process must be ongoing and self-perpetuating. For Nietzsche’s original Overman, Zarathustra, was “fond of all such as makes distant voyages, and like not to live without danger.” Who better to embody the spirit of embracing such voyages, of regularly “overcoming those obstacles,” than Odysseus, from whose name we now define such long, perilous treks.

In fact, the voyage or evolution becomes a sort of motif throughout Nietzsche’s worldview, as it does throughout Homer’s second epic. Durant explains Nietzsche’s commitment to continuous improvement when he writes that it is “better that societies should come to an end than that no higher type should appear.”

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4 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 82.

5 Ibid., 83.
fact, gives us that evolved “higher type” in the figure of Odysseus, as we will consider shortly.

The Overman’s journey, much like Odysseus’ long trek, is defined, in large part, by the affirmation of life. This life became an endless cycle of goal-producing; goal-producing constitutes life.

Unlike most of the Iliadic heroes who take to the battlefield if not in pursuit of death, but surely on a direct path towards it, Odysseus’ journey becomes defined, in large part, by the vast and varied responses to death, from cheating and fleeing to assuming and accepting it, but each time, to do so for the sake of extending life. Any notion of glory is dependent upon his homecoming, and a return home is only made possible through sustained life. Yet at the same time, life becomes a series of varied and unpredictable encounters with death. It is up to Odysseus and his own will to power to overcome the obstacles that stand to threaten or divert him from his ultimate goal of self-realization.

Most of the obstacles that test his ability to overcome present themselves in the form of female figures—Calypso, Circe, the Sirens—while adrift at sea—the most brutally objective and expansively obstacle threatening of all. The choices he makes in overcoming the

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self and these obstacles will ultimately give essence to his being. But first he must wipe the slate clean, return to an empty shell independent of essence.

For Odysseus, this seems an unlikely possibility in that he has already engaged in countless acts and decisions throughout the ten-year war. But perhaps this is why the *Odyssey* actually begins with Odysseus trapped on an island, and isolated with Calypso, a nymph whose name literally translates as “hidden, hide, to cover, to veil.”7 One way to interpret this name choice is to consider her role in covering up Odysseus’ past, and in doing so, his essence at that point in time.

Calypso is the goddess who “welcome[s] him warmly” and then “vow[s] to make the man immortal, ageless, all his days.”8 She is the goddess whom Odysseus rejects along with her offer—a rejection of considerable significance, particularly in terms of this Existential reading and the potential applications for the 21st century man. According to Sartre, freedom begins when the individual, which is nothing, takes the opportunity to say the only thing it can: “no.”9 And in the face of Calypso’s offer of eternal life, Odysseus does just this; he

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8 Homer *The Odyssey* V.150, 151.

9 Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
says “no.” In rejecting immortality, Odysseus shows his first signs (in this second epic) of individual strength in overcoming the self. Accepting her offer would have been a sign of terrible weakness for a number of reasons. First off, the offer is just that: an opportunity granted by an other, not willed by the self. Because it is not self-generated, accepting it would be an inauthentic decision lacking true freedom of choice. The fact is, the offer is a ploy, a way to appeal to desire and greed, a way to make him give into her—an other’s—wants and temptations.

Additionally, had Odysseus become immortal, he would never have the opportunity to return home, to connect to place, and to be the hero that will ultimately live on in memory, forever. The physical immortality would preclude the possibility of a more meaningful and self-created enduring glory.

And so, Odysseus denies temptation in order to choose his self, by accepting, reaffirming, even welcoming death, all in order to sustain life in his personal journey to rediscover himself, to make his name, and to find his place of belonging in this universe. In essence, as Pucci articulates,

Only when he decides to come back and to accept his mortality that the hero begin[s] to be himself and the Odyssey itself begin[s]. Odysseus’ return home, then, represents his return to humanity, consciousness, reality, and responsibility, and the episodes of this return constitute facets of those re-

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appropriations. . . It is from this end—from this conclusion, from the closing up of the return—that a beginning, a point of departure at a lower level, is retrieved.\textsuperscript{10}

Even Pucci, the Greek scholar and literary critic, speaks with Existential undertones about Odysseus’ homecoming; he is able to create essence, or as Pucci explains, “return to humanity,” through his return to and acceptance of mortality.

It is no wonder then, that Odysseus is adamant in proclaiming his mortality to the Phaeacians insisting, “I’m nothing like the immortal gods who rule the skies. . . I’m just a mortal man.”\textsuperscript{11} Even here, he recognizes the insignificance of man, made clear through the reality of death. Again, he insists on his own “return to humanity.”

Part of the problem of being immortal—of having no definite end—would be that one could always rectify wrongs, and with this infinite opportunity, there can neither be a sense of urgency nor a sense of ownership of or responsibility for one’s wrongdoings. If time never runs out, neither does the chance to make amends, and so without the urgency, morality seems to cease—a critical relationship that the final chapter will gravely consider in light of what this may mean for the virtual world of Singularity.


\textsuperscript{11}Homer \textit{The Odyssey} VII.244-5.
Having taken the first step to decide for himself, Odysseus takes a step closer to self and to home: he leaves the island. And in leaving his initial dwelling place in this epic, and in rejecting her promise of immortality, Odysseus experiences the cutting of ties in a way akin to what Nietzsche describes in symbolic terms about “aimless freedom” when he writes:

What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?  

Yes, Odysseus’ seaward journey will, in fact, toss him about in “all directions” throughout a seemingly “infinite nothing.” Seemingly unattached, Odysseus must create the connections to give meaning to his story.

For Odysseus, the “infinite nothing” is the sea, and in this way, it assumes the nature of the Iliad’s death-ridden battlefield. Like the warriors, Odysseus, too, is surrounded by the nothingness that is death, the nothingness that is his own existence. The “wine-dark” and “barren sea” represents the vast expanse of nothingness, which both promises life while harboring death. On the one hand, it is Odysseus’ most life-threatening obstacle and many of his crew’s watery

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12 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 79.

13 Homer The Odyssey V.12.
graveyard; but at the same time, it is his only means by which to return to home and to self. Again, Nietzsche’s metaphor seems particularly poignant in light of the Iliadic setting when he writes of the misleading nature of supposedly free decision-making:

We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us... we have gone farther and destroyed the land behind us... little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean... hours will come when you realize that it is infinite and there is nothing more awesome than infinity.... Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom—and there is no longer any land.\textsuperscript{14}

“Woe,” he exclaims, as a warning to the individual who assumes home, the land left behind, the familiar place of objective values, offers freedom. For as the \textit{Iliad} conveys and as Odysseus will realize, freedom is made possible in the face of the unknown, the unfamiliar, the ambiguous. For Odysseus, that place becomes the infinite sea, for the sea is vast, the sea threatens life, and since one’s identity is so much in part determined by any given individual’s relationship to place—a Sartrean concept—then Odysseus’ identity includes the nothingness and impending death that is the sea. And so the sea, the place of “infinite freedom, become[s] an unfreedom,”\textsuperscript{15} a paradox that can only be overcome through the will to power.

\textsuperscript{14} Oaklander, \textit{Existentialist Philosophy}, 80.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 81.
Hence, Odysseus is left to drift across and around the sea as much as he does between and among levels of self-recognition. The two forms of drifting, in fact, go hand-in-hand. If the sea represents the constant threat of death, then Odysseus must be in a constant state of (re)defining himself, and this state is broad and expansive. This seems in opposition to the Iliadic hero who walks a direct path toward death. During the times Odysseus escapes and cheats death,

The *Odyssey* ... recognizes that a song intended to cheat the strongest power of all—death—inevitably creates with the greatest pleasure the greatest forgetfulness of the self, of man’s essence, and conjures up an elegiac, fabulous world. But the *Odyssey* knows also that such a song can only camouflage the risks of death, since death is unbeatable in the *Odyssey* itself,”

ultimately leaving the hero on a perilous, existential adventure.

It is only by trekking across the nothingness of the life-threatening sea that Odysseus stands a chance of finding himself, of returning home. He travels a twisted route, as does his character’s evolution. The epic opens with the absence of the hero, progresses with the un-naming of him, culminates with the revelation of identity, and resolves with the restoration of it. The *Odyssey* is the story of the protagonist’s rediscovery and reclaiming of his identity: it is the epic tale of the naming of Odysseus. Other scholars agree:

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Odysseus succeeds because he has no aspect of his identity at stake... To imagine a perfect trickster is to imagine a person without any identity, without any vulnerability. To imagine someone without the burden of human life that is a social identity is to imagine the antithesis of human life—a figure of death itself.\textsuperscript{17}

Here, Buchan sets forth the idea that perhaps identity constricts man in some way, maybe in the "vulnerability" identity necessitates. Maybe that is true. Perhaps that is how Odysseus is able to survive so long at sea. His very lack of identity certainly saves him in critical moments, and at the same time, this lack, this absence is a void he is compelled to fill; he literally desires to make a name for his self. Until then, he, according to Buchan, remains a "figure of death itself," and perhaps herein lies a critical point for reflection in light of our attempts at virtual existence whereby names, identities, and "the burden of life" are all in limbo; Chapter Four will attempt to address this issue.

The most notable moment of Odysseus' choice to lose himself occurs in Book IX when he encounters the Cyclops, Polyphemus. Polyphemus is ravenous, set on filling his belly with Odysseus and his crew. Odysseus uses wine, a spike, and a trick to free them from impending doom. Through revelry and intelligence, Odysseus mimics the artist whom Nietzsche extols, the one who balances Dionysian and

\textsuperscript{17} Buchan, \textit{The Limits of Heroism}, 127.
Apollonian forces in the face (or, in this case, the eye) of death. His artistry culminates in what James Joyce deems the greatest pun in all of literature. Moments before his escape, in response to the Cyclops’ inquiry, Odysseus, the stranger, remarks:

So, you ask me the name I’m known by, Cyclops? I will tell you... Nobody—that’s my name. Nobody—.\(^{18}\)

And so, the Cyclops threatens to “eat Nobody,”\(^{19}\) and eat nobody he does, thanks to the cunning skill of Odysseus. Once freed, however, Polyphemus cries for help from others to find “Nobody” and “Nobody’s friends” who were “killing [him] now by fraud and not by force.”\(^{20}\) But as Nobody hurts him, nobody helps him. So it turns out,

Nobody but [Odysseus’] cunning pulled [him] through the monster’s cave [he] thought would be [his] death.\(^{21}\)

This Nobody—a result of Odysseus’ ability and willingness to embrace his self as a non-entity—ultimately saves him in this, one of many, confrontation with death. And if we consider this moment in light of Dimock’s interpretation whereby the Cyclops’ cave embodies the womb as a place of death, then the significance of Odysseus’ escape is twofold. First, it suggests a rebirth, a new beginning; and second,
because of the new beginning, it explains why he leaves with a lack of name. He lacks entity and identity, but has engaged in way that begins to create essence, yet another opportunity to overcome his own self in order to make a name for himself.

Not only brilliant wordplay, the philosophical implications of being Nobody are likewise profound. In that moment, in the very face of death, Odysseus recognizes the significance—not to mention the power—of his own insignificance, of being a no one. He fulfills Sartre’s proclamation that man is “a being who makes himself a lack of being in order that there might be being.”

Though this epic be a journey to reclaim his identity, Odysseus’ survival, in large part, depends on his ability to know when to let go of who he is. Is this still the case for us today?

The Existentialists would explain this calculated loss of self as a process of returning to the state of existence that precedes essence. For when the Odyssey opens, Odysseus is no one but the abstract memory of he whom the stories of his past deeds describe. He is the subject of a narrative others write for him. Even he recognizes the lack of meaning in identifying with the person of these stories, hence, he often refrains from identifying himself as the narrative hero of whom an acquaintance may speak. He tends to keep his name and face

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22 Beauvoir, The Ethics of Ambiguity, 11.
hidden, like the time when Demodocus sings of "the strife between Odysseus and Achilles,"\textsuperscript{23} and Odysseus simply "bur[ies] his handsome face"\textsuperscript{24} in his hands, providing a literal barrier between his past deeds and his current self. This division hearkens back to Kierkegaard’s concept of the divided self, but in this case, it is the narrative of his past that constitutes his eternal being.

While Odysseus may not acknowledge his identity when others tell his story, he certainly creates a name for himself when he assumes the role of storyteller. In this way, the stylistic and structural aspects of the epic further contribute to his emergence as the Greek Ubermensch.

First there is the matter of the shift to a first-person narrative in Book IX. This form functions to give Odysseus his own voice and power over his story, the very story that will ultimately define and immortalize him in the eyes of others. He becomes the story-telling animal crafting his own narrative; he "produces himself, creates himself, in order to become himself."\textsuperscript{25} One way he is successful in doing just this is in using disguises, "artificial device[s] that allow him

\textsuperscript{23} Homer \textit{The Odyssey} VIII.89.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., VIII.102.

\textsuperscript{25} Durant, \textit{The Story of Philosophy}, 426.
to structure the plot of his return,"\(^{26}\) language that underscores the role Odysseus plays in authoring, controlling, connecting his self to his story, and his narrative to The Story.

He begins by assuming the role of poet, from the Greek word *poeites*, meaning "maker." On multiple levels, Odysseus *makes* the self-created being the Ubermensch must be. Even more importantly, Odysseus, unlike the primary poet of the epics themselves, does *not* call upon a Muse, or any other outside source for that matter, to assist, inspire, or otherwise aid in his ability to share his story. He is the self-sufficient poet: "This is *his* story, private, secret; *he* has lived it and *he* tells it. It exists, with small exceptions, only in *his* telling."\(^{27}\)

This shift in narration also sets Odysseus up for re-calling, re-telling, re-living the experiences he has already lived—a cycle mildly reminiscent of Nietzsche's concept *eternal recurrence* at work here. The idea of the Eternal Recurrence—incidentally, a Greek notion—proposes that time is cyclical, and if the universe extends for infinity, man is left to endure the same encounters or combinations of these encounters an infinite amount of time. This burden, as Nietzsche refers to it, explains, in part, how important resilience is to the


Overman. And it requires the ability to say yes to things as they are, ultimately relying on “the supreme test of courage.” In this case, [Odysseus] is the self-creating being who sees himself as the goal through which one achieves the goal. That is to say, although he is the goal, he is not the goal, for his goal is to keep producing goals, to keep producing types of people who will become him, and will use him in order to produce more goals. It is an endless cycle of goal-producing.

As the superman must, Odysseus rises above mediocrity, not merely by outlasting his crew, but by outsmarting and enduring obstacles throughout. Although the following are Neitzsche’s words, consider their applicability to Odysseus’ narrative: “I felt for the first time that the strongest and highest Will to Life does not find expression in a miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to War, a Will to Power, a Will to Overpower!”

It is no wonder, then that Nietzsche argues, “To discipline one’s self—that is the highest thing. . . . The man who does not wish to be merely one of the mass only needs to cease to be easy on himself.” Odysseus, by no means, is easy on himself. The very fact that he struggles with self-discipline (evidenced by his years of laying with

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28 Barrett, Irrational Man, 194.

29 Durant, The Story of Philosophy, 427.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.
Calypso and Circe) even more strongly attest to his eventual ability to overcome the inner desires that overtake him earlier on in the epic. The evolution of his self-willed restraints show itself in his third encounter with the female temptation: the Sirens.

Odysseus, fully aware of the Siren’s allure and power over mortal men, shows superman qualities in two primary ways. First, Odysseus provides his crew with wax plugs for their ears, not wishing any harm on them. This is an important detail because Nietzsche specifies that an Overman should never demonstrate a will to power by way of hurting others. Second, Odysseus chooses not to plug his own ears, relying on his own ability to discipline his self. But, he does still insist on being tied up. In knowing himself well, he recognizes his potential weakness and decides to take action to avoid falling victim to the Sirens’ ploys.

In this decision, he does not deny himself the pleasures of the Siren’s song, but he demonstrates logic and restraint in his choice to be physically restrained; he successful “rechannel[s] [his] passions, to control their direction with reason”\(^{32}\). And in doing so, he, once again, reflects the Nietzschean values of balancing Dionysian and Apollonian forces.

\(^{32}\) Oaklander, *Existentialist Philosophy*, 83.
Time and again, it seems that here, as with the Iliadic heroes desire motivates the man in his decisions. Desire is but an absence of something. And an absence of something equates to a presence of nothing. And so, like the Sartrean mantra which contends “existence precedes essence,” so, too, does the Odyssey seem to present a hero of radical emptiness, in a perpetual state of nothingness, who seems to exist prior to and independent of having essence. Is this how all heroes—all humans—must begin their respective narrative?

As desire is a void that needs satiating, sustenance, it is often associated with appetite. Therefore, one might interpret the incessant hunger which besets Odysseus on a most literal level to be a constant reminder of the absence and emptiness within: “The belly’s a shameless dog,” he explains to the Phaeacians, “always insisting, pressing, it never lets us forget... still it keeps demanding...”33 Note the connection between the stomach (“belly”) and memory (“never forget”), between hunger and identity; they are interrelated. Odysseus “starve[s] for passage home,”34 and it will be at home where Antinous

[strikes] [him] all because of [his] good-for-nothing belly—that,

33 Homer The Odyssey VII.250-4.
34 Ibid., VIII.181.
that curse that makes such pain for us poor men.\textsuperscript{35}

Odysseus claims,

It\textquoteleft{}s just this belly of mine, 
this trouble-maker, tempts me to take a licking.\textsuperscript{36}

And yet, Odysseus will be said to have "lost his hunger"\textsuperscript{37} by the time he is back in his palace, for he begins to feed, at last, on his home, his roots, his self; the hero gets his fill. He is satiated and named at the same point in time:

Odysseus\textquotesingle{} single-handed self-restoration in Phaeacia and his resort to literal disguise on Ithaca set him apart as a hero who is not subject to these limitations, a hero who is so thoroughly in control of his situation that he can adopt and abandon these limitations at will, and who can serve as the agent of their transcendence by others. With these characters Odysseus is able to play the role of a god.\ldots\textsuperscript{38}

The "limitations" referenced in the aforementioned passage are the dependencies the other characters have on Odysseus. As a self-overcoming individual, Odysseus is able to exist independently, not in a state of dependence. This is in direct contrast to the others around him who have not evolved to this level of freedom. While the "overcoming or mastery of others" may not be the "aim of the drive for

\textsuperscript{35} Homer The Odyssey XVII.521-2.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., XVIII.62.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., XX.153.

\textsuperscript{38} Murnaghan, Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey, 53.
power,” it very well may “aid in the cultivation and strengthening of it,” as seems the case with Odysseus’ return.

Perhaps his ability to be a self-defining, self-determining, self-overcoming individual culminates in a final fulfillment of one last critical component of the Übermensch: creating and acting according to one’s own set of values. Odysseus creates his own code in the way he subverts the traditional homecoming ritual: returning in disguise, testing even his most loyal followers, and invoking a battle instead of a celebration. In undermining the tradition of homecoming and subverting the heroic return, Odysseus’ final choices emerge from his own needs, wants, and understanding.

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39 Oaklander, Existentialist Philosophy, 82.
CHAPTER 4
NEEDING AN END: THE CHALLENGE OF VIRTUAL EXISTENCE

“There it is, the unbearable lightness of being.”
-Milan Kundera

The Virtual Realm

At the time, William Barrett identified the problem of reconciling “the height of culture with the depth of instinct” as “the most formidable problem of man in our twentieth, the psychoanalytic, century;”¹ and I might argue that this same problem has only intensified since.

Nearly three decades later, and writing about the twenty-first century, the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, uses language familiar to the Existential doctrine when he articulates three, what he calls malaises of modernity—achievements that society as a whole, or so he claims, criticizes as having led to serious decline in everyday existence. They are: 1) individualism, 2) the disenchantment of the world, 3) loss of freedom. Taylor’s conclusions identify fundamental Existential ideals/principles as the disease of an even worse epidemic: the decline of society. But what Taylor sets out to argue in the rest of his book, The Ethics of Authenticity,” is that “. . . we don’t really

¹Barrett, Irrational Man, 178.
understand these changes that worry us, that the usual run of debate
about them in fact misrepresents them—and thus makes us
misconceive what we can do about them."2 I, too, through my course
of studies, have begun to see these ideas and arguments in new light,
and here, in this final chapter, attempt to reconcile these new
understandings with the new realm of existing before us.

So it seems, for a predominantly European movement of the late
19th and 20th century, the American man existing in the 21st century
seems, at the very core, to question Existentially, if not also to live,
more or less, that way, too. Chapter One helped to illustrate just why
and how I have arrived at this premise, a fundamental premise for the
rest of the studies.

And I only see the Existential questions of being, the Existential
sense of self as lost and fragmented, the Existential purpose of self-
actualizing, the Existential notion of anxiety, increasing, especially in
light of the way society as a whole is compounding. This is
particularly apparent with the youngest American generation:
Generation Y. As a high school English teacher, I see it everyday:
fragmented schedules, frenetic days, increasing self-doubt, rise in

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behaviors of self-destruction, and constant insulation through social media.

Just consider the leading epithet for this generation: "Generation Me." The youth is focused on themselves and turned more inward than ever before. But inward does not necessarily result in reflection or self-actualizing, or at least not always in the most free, most authentic, most meaningful and Existential way. In fact, while these young people are encountering and posing many of the same fundamental questions of being the human race has for centuries, a study from Strauss and Howe reveals that "Developing a meaningful philosophy of life" in response to these questions has decreased across generations, from 73% for Boomers to 45% for Millennials. So while they may be facing similar problems of existing, they may not be confronting them through necessary questioning. Is Generation Y expecting Google to provide them with these solutions, too? And if individuals are not confronting these questions, then what relationship to them are they creating in response?

One—perhaps the most critical—aspect of being that these studies have helped clarify and confirm is the necessity of relationship in cultivating any sort of meaning. As we've seen time and again,

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inherent to man and his sense of meaning is his need to connect, with self, with others, through story. When Agamemnon makes purely pleasurable connections as an aesthetic, he finds himself repeatedly dissatisfied and ultimately unsuccessful at creating an authentic self. Of course, Achilles' commitment to Patroclus and duty to avenge his death elevates his ability to engage meaningfully, but being tied to a sense of duty ultimately precludes his ability to experience true freedom.

Nowadays, it is almost as if we are functioning according to a perverted sense of living in terms of others—always seeking to impress, or at the very least, placate them. And in trying to impress, man too readily becomes an abstract version of what others may expect of him to be. In choosing to become the image that pleases others, man projects a version of himself, and in doing so, both further fragments his self from his being and distances himself from the other. Essentially, the individual is crafting these narratives without substance, and instead according to vanity. Instead of over-coming the self, man is under the influence of others in the most superficial fashion.

But the epic hero—maybe all authentic heroes—on one level seems to be driven by and for others: to act for, to do good by, to save. But as the previous chapters demonstrated, the most meaningful
heroic act is one done in total freedom. It is no longer the heroic choices that define man’s immortality, but the life he chooses to display via social media that constitutes his self.

Camus’ notion of the absurd “divorce between man and his life”\textsuperscript{4} and Kierkegaard’s reality of the divided self seem more apparent than ever. But in lieu of an eternal side is a virtual one. We’ve seen place in terms of a battlefield and the open sea, and now, a realm of cyberspace. The Existentialists fought against abstracting life. But in a virtual realm, the objects of direct experience have all but vanished into thin air. And the beings we become in response to and in order to engage in this realm are also mere abstractions, personas.

Not only do these personas represent a separation between who one is and who one seems to be, the individuals crafting this perceived narrative do so more in an attempt to document than to experience the moment. Generation Y, in particular, seems so fixated on creating a memory that they inadvertently remove themselves from the present in order to document (pictures, you tube, instragram, video, quickpix). They attempt to capture the present for the future through the past. The result: profound temporal displacement.

This shift to virtual living continues to have profound effects on daily existence, and we are so early in this development, we have yet

\textsuperscript{4}Oaklander, \textit{Existentialist Philosophy}, 340.
to really experience or grasp the long-term effects. But on a basic, day-to-day level, all things web-related have dramatically shifted an individual's focus on creating a relationship with his own life to creating new lives based on others. While members of Generation X will most likely switch their careers about six times over the course of lifetime, Generation Y will have that number of identities over the same course of time—a staggering statistic, a harrowing reality. Creating online identities and status fillers provide a false sense of creating a relationship to one's own life.

But is it so different from the Odysseus we may have just acknowledged as the formidable hero of our past and for our time? Are Odysseus' range of identities any more, any less authentic than those we create on Facebook, Linkedin, MySpace, and countless other virtual venues? What is driving these creations of new identities but a sense of what to project to others? In this way, external forces, namely the opinions and expectations of others, seem to be. And when outside force drive decisions, the self being created can only be named inauthentic.

Odysseus, too, suffers from inauthentic existing at first. He's not always in control of his decisions either—too often he's told to wait, told which path to take, told what to allow his men to do. But, is it not Sartre who says that freedom is what we're able to do with
what's been done to us? And Simone Weil who admits to never having been more free than when under Nazi regime? Odysseus is able to make the right choices and not give into the spontaneity or moments of weak will that plague his men.

Simone de Beauvoir articulates yet another paradoxical problem in this individualistic existing of today: the same man who recognizes himself to be “the supreme end to which all action should be subordinated” is also the one to “treat one another as instruments or obstacles, as means.”

Reducing our relationships with others for utilitarian purposes also reveals an insufficiency of the individual to be self-sustaining and self-creating; using others to improve the self hinders self from being entirely self-overcoming. Technology is becoming yet another form of other on which the being can depend:

The dominant place of technology is also thought to have contributed to the narrowing and flattening of our lives... of a loss of resonance, depth, or richness in our human surroundings. ... The claim is that the solid, lasting often expressive objects that saved us in the past are being set aside for the quick, shoddy, replaceable commodities with which we now surround ourselves. Albert Borgman speaks of the “device paradigm,” whereby we withdraw more and more from “manifold engagement” with our environment and instead request and get products designed to deliver some circumscribed benefit.

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The device paradigm most satisfies the aesthetic. Are we, as a society, being reduced to pure aesthetics? Like living in Agamemnon’s world of ephemeral pleasures and short-lived “glory,” a YouTube video gone viral or some other form of fifteen minutes of fame. Even the notion of glory is perverted, more specifically, shortened, even cheapened, nowadays.

And even when we are making decisions apparently for and by our “self,” we need to be more conscious of what ultimately may be motivating the decisions. What the Existentialists referred to (and critiqued) as Rationalism, Taylor redefined as “instrumental reason,” and in both cases, they critique “the kind of rationality we draw on when we calculate the most economical application of means to a given end. Maximum efficiency, the best cost-output ratio, its measure of success.” Author Malcom Gladwell recognizes a similar phenomenon in his book, Outliers, specifically in his chapter, “On Rice Paddies and Math Tests.” His findings lead him to conclude that the American way of life has resulted in sacrificing effectiveness for efficiency. And it comes at a cost.

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7 Taylor, Ethics of Authenticity, 6.

Perhaps this cost is what had Existentialists skeptical of, and ultimately rejecting, rationalism as the ultimate ruler: “You can never get an ought from an is,” explained Hume. What danger, then, in having disrupted the hierarchical chain: “Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders.” The orders being the hierarchical structure, the “great chain of Being,” the sense of a higher power. In its absence, man is left to wonder: Am I here to fulfill a predetermined role, or am I here to craft my own narrative? Why must it always be either/or? Can it not be, as with so much of the Existential ideology, a matter of both/and, a matter of balancing the opposing forces.

Maybe we need to embrace de Beauvoir’s “fundamental ambiguity” in which both oppositions exist, for therein lies truth. But as Kurzweil’s invention blurred lines between machine and human, so, too, we may be headed in a direction of blurring oppositions rather than balancing them.

Fundamental tensions defining being and story still exist (apart from and part of, alone and connected, choosing other in choosing self). In fact, these tensions may actually be multiplying and stretching even further at both ends of the spectrum. We seem to be

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9 Taylor, Ethics of Authenticity, 3.

10 Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, 10.
increasingly more individualistic and yet increasingly more concerned
with others; we seem to be more alone than ever before and yet are
more connected in ways that seem virtually impossible. Virtually.
Yes, so much of the increasing tension is perpetuated by the virtual,
quote unquote, reality we are all but being thrust into. Currently,
man seems to be functioning in a perpetual flux, much like Achilles as
he tried to navigate the aesthetic and ethical realms. However, unlike
him, we seem unable to balance the opposing forces.

The Need for Death

Finally, to bring these studies full circle, I return to the two
factors I consider most at work in said “progress;” they are:
introduction of the virtual age, as the first part of this conclusion
aimed to expound upon, and elimination (or efforts to this end) of
death. In both cases, the root of the change is in the manipulation of
time.

Perhaps, more than anything else, these studies ultimately
culminate in what Homer’s epics and Existential philosophy both
attest to: it is only in recognizing that “our lives are much too
brief...”\textsuperscript{11} does an individual begin to dwell in a particular time, place,
and situation, completely cut off from the rest of history and
immersed in one’s own narrative; the promise of life is death and one

\textsuperscript{11} Homer \textit{The Odyssey} XIX.377.
must trust it, must confront it, must deal with it intimately so that one 
may live.\textsuperscript{12}

The Greek and Existential considerations suggest that we cannot 
achieve freedom without the reality of death. Perhaps this is what de 
Beauvoir was really wondering when she asked, “By beating death, 
will [we] have lost our essential humanity?”\textsuperscript{13}

And yet, when it comes to the matter of death, it seems we, as a 
culture, have more or less established a one-way relationship to it: 
overcome, defeat, eliminate it. Eradicate disease, utilize life support 
machines, even pay to have the appearance of being younger, of being 
further away from death’s grasp.

Without death, we can instantly remove the sense of fragility 
and nothingness that each human being must currently, and has had to 
accept ever since The Fall. But at what cost? The risks run wide, from 
producing a sense of false security, to thinking we are already 
complete and therefore have little to work towards, to losing any 
concept of consequence. Death is what makes us human. Remember, 
even Odysseus rejects the promise of everlasting life, twice.

Furthermore, a world without death is bound to lead to utter 
complacency. After all, nothing unnerves and awakens the human

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\item \textsuperscript{12} Ambrosio, “Existentialism” (lecture, Fall, 2006).
\item \textsuperscript{13} Beauvoir, \textit{Ethics of Ambiguity}, 11.
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mind more than disjointed fragments and seemingly random unknowns—lack of’s, nothings. Without death’s reminder that we are not whole, we may foolishly think we are born complete. But that’s just it. We are not born any different from Agamemnon or Hector or Odysseus. Nor are we faced with starkly different questions of being. But we are responding in new ways, and instead of crafting authentic stories, we are revolutionizing the Story.

Has this loss of a greater order/structure also led to a “loss of heroic dimension”? A loss of greater purpose, of something worth dying for, a lack of passion? This perspective hearkens back to the initial question of heroes—their role, their need, their place—in our world today. Without heroes, can we have hope?

Despite the overwhelming sense of meaninglessness and emptiness associated with Existentialism, de Beauvoir proposes that “the most optimistic ethics have all begun by emphasizing the elements of failure involved in the condition of man; without failure, no ethics.” And what is hope but the continuous “Yes” to failure? But can there be failure in a virtual existence? Can failure truly exist in a deathless world—a world in which man never has to confront the potential to no longer be?

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14 Taylor, Ethics of Authenticity, 4.

15 Beauvoir, Ethics of Ambiguity, 10.
Without failure, is there ever a need to improve? Without a sense of urgency, a sense that one day, there will not be any more time or chance or opportunity to engage, to act, to rectify a wrong. Without urgency, there may be no (need for?) morality. So where is personal responsibility in all of this?

Ryan Halligan did not die a “beautiful death.” While he died young, he was at his acme and was not acting with total freedom. He didn’t die for himself; he died because of something or someone else. He used death as an answer, which may be the only/primary way it eventually will be used. Did he retreat from battle like Achilles did in his greatest moment of weakness? Halligan, and others dying in a similar vain, may be less like the epic heroes we’ve encountered thus far, and perhaps more akin to the countless unnamed warriors who are “mostly of little significance individually, and they exist, in many cases, only for the moment in which they are seen to die.”

Although Halligan did not die a beautiful death, he did, at the very least engage in a confrontation with death. Unfortunately, he surrendered his own power to and will to that of the great void.

Now, what Kurzeweil is ultimately suggesting is a post-human era, where man does not merely transcend death, he ultimately eliminates it, and in doing so, deprives every future individual the

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16 Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death*, 103.
means by which to attain true freedom, authentic being, and an ethical existence. In other words, the elimination of death becomes the death of our species, of the very no-thing that has allowed us to evolve—not physically, of course, but in terms of self-created meaning and individual freedom and personal responsibility. Artificial Intelligence threatens to supplant Existential Existence. And since the former is capable of increasing by its own volition, it becomes a perverted version of the ultimate Overman—or Over-Machine, as it would be in this case. As machine develops exponentially, man would ultimately cease to exist, let alone have essence.

What has happened, of course, is that the mankind has finally gotten to the point that they have so much power that they can imbue something inanimate with the ability to create even more power. With this evolution, man is no longer in charge of his destiny.

If an individual has always derived power from self-exploration, and the current changes in technology and evolution serves to deny man that very journey—that ever-important odyssey of self-actualizing. In reducing urgency and threats of nothingness, man, on one hand, exhibits power, and at the same time, diminishes all that humanity has worked towards. The Story of centuries of chapters runs a risk of ending altogether. Once man loses that power and that will to self because there is something else that can right our wrongs, tell
our story, capture our moments, that’s when mankind loses its connections to Story. And once the stories stop to be archetypal stories, we not only strip power of our own autonomy and humanity, but we ultimately in that process, strip the power of narrative as it has existed thus far. Individuals no longer have a point of context, a relationship to be part of while seeking how to stand out from.

So what shall we say to ourselves as we confront to dawn of this new age? Will we, like Achilles be dictated by it, or, like Hector, dictate from it. Will we take the leap to faith, and if so, in what do we place our faith?

But maybe drawing the analogy between modern man and Homeric heroes is mistaken. Maybe the 21st century man is on his way to becoming more akin to the fickle Gods than to the ancient heroes. We idolize and now aspire to a superman of another kind: the superhero—the part man, part other creature who can defy basic laws of gravity, of time, of space. Like the Homeric Gods, superheroes are not bound by earthly constraint; they transcend time and ethical restraint, they can do whatever they want to whomever they want. In defying earthly constraint, and they defy ethical restraint.

Maybe that’s the attraction to the superhero and the attraction to the internet, to defy these basic principles: we can be what we are and create what we want to be in a virtual realm.
But, the Homeric Gods are not the focus of the epic; in fact, to some extent, they are almost superfluous, certainly lacking meaning in and of themselves. They are the peripheral and meddling causes that tempt, tease, and take care of heroes. The fact is, Homer’s poems “pursue their vision of human heroism, glory and suffering at the expense of a plausible and satisfying treatment of the divine. . . . both poems could be told without reference to the Gods; these are not poems about Gods, but about human beings.”17 The Gods are merely the outside forces that the heroes must work to avoid depending on in order to create and preserve their own authenticity. They actually do not matter in the grand scheme of things—which raises the question: Will the virtual man?

Will our Story’s next chapter be one of heroes or of gods?

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