Chapter 1
Learning from the Iliad: virtues and persuasion

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Introduction

Rhetoric, as the art of persuasion with words, offers a conceptual system that is important for building new theories of management and for understanding the actual activities of managers. This art did not appear out of nowhere, but is rooted in deep personal skills. Normal people have capacities for speaking and persuading, and they develop them in all the social interactions in which they participate. Along the very long historical road from skills to the art of rhetoric, it is interesting to observe the following stages: in the first stage, oral cultures transmit their knowledge and values through stories and conversations; in this process, many men and women become extraordinarily good story-tellers and persuaders. In the second stage, formal schooling and training in writing and grammar, argument and poetry have a deep influence on forms of persuasion. In the third stage, education in the art of rhetoric develops very high levels of skill in the practice of persuasion both in everyday situations and in public speeches.

Besides these stages of development, it is also important to be aware of the main meanings of the name rhetoric, even though they are closely related. Rhetoric means the actual activities of persuasion in which people engage in all kinds of cultural settings. In this sense, we talk about the rhetoric of a public speech, the rhetoric of Barack Obama and the rhetoric of managers. Rhetoric also means the art or science of persuading with words and introduces a conceptual framework and system of practical rules. In this sense, we talk about the rhetoric of Aristotle, as it is formulated in his books. Finally, rhetoric means an educational programme based on the art of rhetoric, which constitutes one of the main foundations of the history of Western education. In this sense, we talk about the evolution of rhetorical curricula in high schools and universities.

This chapter will discuss some outstanding examples of persuasion that are presented in the Homeric poem The Iliad. Even if it is a mythical narrative, it reflects the influence of dialogues and poetry in the Heroic Ages of Greek culture some centuries before the Golden Age of Athens and the creation of the art of rhetoric. This approach emphasizes the cultural development of natural skills of persuasion and relates them to the virtues that are necessary for sustaining a democratic commercial society.
Persuasion in the Homeric poem the Iliad

All cultures have foundational narratives in the sense that they present myths about their cosmic and social origins which contribute to the construction of their national identities. These kinds of stories include situations in which heroes and gods try to persuade one another. In The Iliad, however, even though it is a poem of war, persuasion has an outstanding role. While enjoying the book, readers can reflect on important rhetorical experiences and managing coalitions.

The poem and its subject

The Iliad is a very long narrative poem, which has more than 15,000 verse lines, organized in 24 songs or chapters. It is attributed to Homer, who composed and recited it in the 7th century B.C., bringing together many oral traditions. It became a written text in the following century. The English translation by Robert Fagles, (Penguin Books, 1991), with an audio-cassette read by Derek Jacobi, preserves the form of Greek poetry, and the translation by Stanley Lombardo (1997) adapts the verses to the flow of modern English. The poem is about the War of Troy (Ilium is the name of the city) between Achaeans (Greeks) and Trojans, whose mythical cause was the seduction and kidnapping of the strikingly beautiful Helen. The war took place in the 12th century B.C., 5 centuries before Homer’s time. The story of The Iliad has, however, a specific subject, which is clearly introduced in the first verse: RAGE, the rage of Achilles, the supreme hero, in his confrontation with Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek coalition.

The coalition was formed by more than 150 kings of small city kingdoms (many centuries before they became city-states). The incident that produced the confrontation happened in the 10th year of the war and it can be summarized in the following way: Agamemnon took Chriseis, the daughter of Chryses, Apollo’s Trojan priest as a trophy of war. As Agamemnon refused to give her back to her father, Apollo rained mortal arrows upon the Greeks for nine days. Agamemnon called the Council of Kings and, Achilles accused him of provoking the situation and compelled him to release the young woman. Agamemnon did so but in revenge, he displayed his power by seizing Briseis the girl who, also as a trophy of war, belonged to and was loved by Achilles. After this offence, Achilles withdrew from fighting. As a consequence of his behaviour, the course of the war changed, and many Greek fighters were killed by Hector, the Trojan hero.

War and words: trying to persuade Achilles

The Iliad is a poem of war that describes with brutal realism multiple ways in which heroes kill one another using swords, spears, arrows and whatever they can lay their hands on. At the same time, the poem presents more than 200 rhetorical discussions, and these are not limited to a few lines. The Council of Kings is an instance of the meetings of war commanders, which, ironically for
the modern mentality, in future centuries were to have a strong influence on the
development of democracy.

One of the most outstanding rhetorical examples of *The Iliad* is introduced in
Chapter Nine, in which the text is almost exclusively devoted to persuasive
arguments relating to the following situation: the Greeks are in a perilous
situation; Hector and the Trojans are pushing them back to their ships and at
dawn they will destroy them. Agamemnon calls another meeting of the Council
of Kings and proposes to go back home. But the wise old hero, Nestor, whose
words are “sweeter than honey”, proposes to send a delegation to Achilles and
he cleverly chooses three friends of his for this mission: Odysseus (Ulysses),
“the resourceful man”, provided with “nimble wits”; Ajax, the second bravest
Greek fighter, and Phoenix, the old preceptor of Achilles. Their long and subtle
arguments display their high skills of persuasion.

*Odysseus’ words*

Odysseus explains to Achilles, in very dramatic, vivid and powerful
language, the situation of the Greeks. After this description, his first argument is
that Achilles can save the Achaeans, and that, if he does not do so, he will feel
grief for the rest of his life. It is a moral consideration of remorse, compassion
and solidarity. The second argument is based on the advice that Achilles’
father gave to his son: hold your pride and fiery spirit in check: friendship is better and
your Achaean comrades will exalt you all the more. These reasons and the
feelings associated with them, reinforced by the authority of the father,
emphasize the benefits of the virtues of wisdom (prudence) and temperance
(self-control). The third argument consists of describing the list of impressive
gifts that Agamemnon will give Achilles; he will even give back Briseis and
offer one of his daughters in marriage. This part focuses on practical profits and
social prestige. The fourth and final argument is that Achilles will be honoured
by the Achaeans and he will kill Hector, proving that no fighter can be equal to
him. This argument is associated with aristocratic fighting courage, the value
Achilles most appreciates.

*Achilles’ answer*

Achilles answers with a long speech: he will not fight and Agamemnon will
never win him over. The king has not kept his promises and gives the same
treatment to the heroes as to the cowards. He is also a coward who does not
fight but receives the best part of the booty of war. He has humiliated him more
than other fighters by taking Briseis from him. Achilles thinks that the war for
the beautiful Helen makes no sense: not only Achaeans love their families. He
will not marry a daughter of Agamemnon’s. He tells of his mother’s prophecy
about his own destiny and, in spite of his aristocratic values, he says that he
prefers to leave the war and have a long peaceful life rather than to fight, have a
short life and win long lasting glory. In this way, Achilles makes a decision that
clashes with his aristocratic mentality, the ultimate value of which is glory in battle. Finally, he begs Odysseus to protect himself and to sail home.

**Phoenix’s words**

Homer carefully suits the arguments to the personality and feelings of the speakers. Phoenix, the old hero, who has been the preceptor of Achilles, stresses many emotional questions in his arguments and tells long stories, which were considered fitting for an old fellow.

Phoenix addresses forceful arguments to Achilles with tears and sweet words; “if you leave, I will be left alone in the sands of Troy; would you do nothing to save the Achaeans? Do you not have a heart? You are confused by anger, and even the gods may change their attitudes towards you”. Phoenix tells his own story: he had a terrible confrontation with his father and the gods curse was that he could never have children. Peleus, Achilles father, protected him and asked him to educate the untrained young boy both in speeches and in battles [This observation is very important for understanding the mentality of Greek heroes]. In return, Phoenix considered Achilles as his own son. The old tutor goes on to tell another story: an ancient hero decided not to fight for his fellow countrymen and rejected the gifts that they offered him, because he was offended. In the end, his wife made him change his mind, and he fought, but he did not receive any presents or honours. This story was a premonition of what was to happen in the next few days.

**Achilles’ final answer**

Achilles reproached Phoenix for arguing in favor of Agamemnon and offered him the hospitality of staying the night in his tent and leaving in his ship. But events unfolded differently: Patroclus, the young friend of Achilles, takes pity on the Achaeans, puts on Achilles’ helmet and fights. Hector, who mistakes him for Achilles, challenges and kills him. Achilles directs his rage at Hector, fights again, challenges Hector, kills him, and drags his body unceremoniously onto the plains of Troy and father of Hector, goes by night to the tent of Achilles and asks him for the body of his son. His words “I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son” (translation by Stanley Lombardo) constitutes the moral summit of the poem. *The Iliad* ends with the funerary pyre of Hector, before the death of Achilles and the fall of Troy, events that the Greeks new very well.

**The end of the story**

Homer could have ended *The Iliad* with many different episodes of the War of Troy, such as the death of Hector, the death of Achilles or the fall of the city. He showed, however, his extraordinary poetic, moral and human sensitivity by closing his poem with a chapter whose main event is a dramatic: Priam, Hector’s father and king of Troy, goes by night to Achilles’ tent and asks him
for the body of his son. His words "I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son" (translation by Stanley Lombardo) constitute the moral high-point of the poem. Achilles honours the king’s courage and agrees to his request. Both of them weep for a long time, Achilles for Patroclus and his old father and Priam for Hector. For the first time, Achilles feels compassion and his change in behavior constitutes a kind of moral redemption. This narrative ending gives a new meaning to the Iliad, which devotes its last verses not to Achilles but to Hector’s funerary pyre.

Management and virtues

From the point of view of rhetoric The Iliad presents clear evidence of the high level of complexity, subtlety and finesse in persuasive activities that was attained by the Greeks before the Classical Age. Modern readers can learn from these examples, to which, later on, the art of rhetoric added a conceptual system. The poem also invites us to reflect on two topics, which are related to rhetoric: managing coalitions and developing individual and social virtues.

Managing coalitions

On an organizational level, the conflict emerges from ways of managing a military coalition: when things go wrong, allies have different interests and may withdraw from the field. Pride, arrogance, power, status and honour lead Agamemnon and Achilles to clash with one another. But this subject can be stated in a general form that includes other kinds of coalitions, such as alliances of companies, networks, research groups and work teams. All of these can present similar problems and break down in unfavourable circumstances. These managerial topics embrace subjects related to the virtues of people.

The concept of virtue

On the level of virtues and values, it is interesting, when reading The Iliad, to reflect on the notion and roles of virtues in social, economic and organizational life. For the ancient Greeks, the expression “a virtuous action” meant an action performed in the most excellent way. From it, the phrase “a virtuous person” referred to an individual who, thanks to his or her natural capacities and training, commonly performed various kinds of virtuous acts. In modern Italian, “a virtuoso” musician has a similar meaning. So the old concept of virtue or arête, was very close to the modern notion of excellence, including organizational excellence. In the aristocratic Heroic Ages, the most important virtue was courage in battles. Later on, Greek merchants admired and acquired other virtues. Classical philosophers considered the four moral or pagan virtues of wisdom (prudence), justice, courage and temperance whilst the Christian tradition introduced the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love, which nowadays can be interpreted from religious or secular points of view.
Virtues for a commercial society

Deirdre McCloskey, in her lectures and in her book The Bourgeois Virtues: Ethics for an Age of Commerce (2006), emphasizes that Achilles, the supreme hero, who can defeat all other fighters, has developed courage in battles to an outstanding level - but he lacks the other virtues. Without wisdom, he does not protect himself in the course of his life; without justice, like Agamemnon, he does not establish fair relations with his fellow Achaeans; without temperance, he cannot control his pride and his rage. As he has no love, he is dominated by his hate and has no solidarity with the fate of the Greeks, except his friends. As he is an extreme individualist, he only cares for his long lasting glory. In contrast, Odysseus had a blend of all virtues. People who only possess one virtue are not good social models and can become serious social problems.

Following this line of thought for McCloskey The Iliad illustrates her theory of the necessary virtues for a commercial society: Adam Smith's (1723-1790) An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776) is considered to be the conceptual foundation of prudent economic behaviour. But economists forgot that he was a professor of rhetoric and moral philosophy, and that he also wrote The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), where he presented a moral framework of virtues for a commercial society.

To become an excellent manager or researcher requires developing the seven basic virtues; courage to overcome difficulties, prudence in making decisions, temperance for self control in tough situations, justice in dealing with other people, faith in one’s identity and capacities, hope in future projects and love for others both in collaboration and competition.

References