

# *THUMOS*: CULTURE, SOCIETY, MIND, BRAIN

By Jonathan Shay, MD, PhD

For Symposium, *Von Achilles bis Zidane. Zur Genealogie des Zorns*,

Einstein Forum, Potsdam, Germany 11–13  
December 2008

Homer uses the word *thumos* more than 700 times and Plato said it was a third of every human soul, but the reputation of *thumos* has been quite turbulent since then. So have we grown out of *thumos*? Left it behind in humanity's childhood and in each of our own infantile histories?

Along with Francis Fukuyama and others, I have been trying to put this juicy Homeric word back into current circulation.<sup>1</sup> It's an odd thing to want to do, since for Homer and for Plato, it seems to be something to do with killing rage, or at least with anger. Anyone attending to it, except to condemn it, is suspected of being one of those Weimar-era intellectual chatterers in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, whose eyes sparkle when speaking of violence.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fukuyama transliterates it *thymos*.

My interest springs from twenty years of clinical work as a psychiatrist with psychologically injured US combat veterans. I quickly learned that what took the greatest toll of their lives, of their families, workplaces, and communities, was traumatic damage to good character. Many of the veterans we worked with had been incarcerated, many had led very violent lives since their return to civilian life. Their own violence had blighted their lives, and ultimately, I came to know that most of these men hated their own bad behavior, suffered great humiliation when they contemplated it and the damage it had rained down on their families and themselves. They could recall times when they considered virtue possible, worth the effort, and had even in some degree attained it.

In the clinic they were sometimes extraordinarily difficult—

- Demands for honor and acknowledgment
- “Entitlement”
- Self-important claims to having been players in the most significant events in human history
- Readiness with which they take angry and even violent offense at what they take to be slights to their dignity

- Occasional insistence that they will deal only with the Chief of Service or Hospital Director (“the head of the snake”)
- “Global” destructiveness of their fantasies, wishes, and occasionally, behavior
- Vulnerability to collapses of morale which leave them so apathetic that they cannot want or will anything at all
- Hypochondriacal preoccupations and psychosomatic disorders

All of these were swept together and damned with the psycho-jargon—“narcissistic!”

I shall attempt to persuade you to see *thumos* as a suitable bearer for the load that we want the concept of “character” to carry.

Traumatic damage to character is a phenomenon actively *refused* and *denied* by American psychiatry, but accepted by the World Health Organization. American psychiatry follows a flag that we first spot marching with Plato and carried forward to this day. This is what’s on that flag: if you make it out of childhood with good character, nothing in the way of bad experience can budge you off your firm stand on

virtue. Plato spoke of good breeding [we would say good genes] and good upbringing as ingredients in the cement that sets rock-hard as good character. No bad experience can change that, or so Plato said—his Athenian contemporaries would have considered it crackpot. Once you accept this philosophic position, you end up viewing someone who misbehaves as damaged goods from the start. The general position of American psychiatry is that any new bad behavior after bad experience in adulthood is taken as the current expression of a preexisting flaw. Any narrative, including incontrovertible evidence, of “betrayal of what’s right” in a high stakes situation by people in authority is taken as merely the attempt of a character disordered patient to “get over on,” to deceive and manipulate the clinician for some advantage.

Here in Germany, Professor Michael Linden and his group<sup>2</sup> at the Rehabilitation Centre Tetlow/Berlin and Charité have been working persistently and creatively to expand our knowledge in this territory of post-traumatic character change through a diagnosis that they

---

<sup>2</sup> Research Group Psychosomatic Rehabilitation, University Medicine Berlin and Department of Behavioral and Psychosomatic Medicine, Rehabilitation Center Teltow/Berlin, Teltow/Berlin, Germany

propose, called *Posttraumatic Embitterment Disorder*. They have developed a wealth of new understanding through their work with East Germans whose life-trajectories were shot out of the sky by reunification.

Professor Amélie Rorty translates *thumos* as “the energy of spirited honor.” In the 1920’s Swedish scholar Ernst Arbman offered an illuminating German equivalent for *thumos* as ‘*die Ichseele*,’ the ‘I-soul,’ which captures its narcissistic dimension and sparks over into the concept of identity, as it is currently used in the phrase “identity politics.” The conventional English translation of *thumos* as “spirit” is opaque or misleading. Maybe the German, *das Gemüt*, is better, because of its use in connection with self-respect. This is weakened by the inclination to make a joke of it, I am told, but I cannot claim first-hand experience with the semantic range of the German word.

Resurrecting the unfamiliar word, *thumos* has some advantages. As Fukuyama has pointed out, modern democracies often fail to recognize honor and the desire for recognition as part of the *universal and normal* makeup of humans, noticing it only in its pathological and deformed states.

Deformity of *thumos* is a common and disastrous complication of the primary psychological injuries of war.

According to Hegel, all human warfare originates in a fight-to-the death over honor, a fight for unconditional recognition and acknowledgement, *Sehnsucht nach Anerkennung* by an equal, which only one of them can win. However, in Hegel's analysis, there are *two* ways to lose: death with honor, or the all-encompassing dishonor—the social death—of enslavement. Honor is a social phenomenon; its interior psychic mirror is *thumos*. Commenting on Plato's "guardians," Aristotle says in *Politics* VII.6.1327b39-1328a7, "The attitude which some require in their guardians—to be friendly to all whom they know and savage to all who are unknown—is the attitude of a high-spirited temper [*thumoeides*]. *Thumos* is the faculty of our souls which issues in love and friendship; and it is a proof of this that when we think ourselves slighted our spirit is stirred more deeply against acquaintances and friends than ever it is against strangers.... This faculty in our souls not only issues in love and friendship: it is also the source of any power of commanding and any feeling for freedom.... It is *thumos* that causes

affectionateness, for spirit is the capacity of the soul whereby we love...It is from this faculty that power to command and love of freedom are in all cases derived.”<sup>3</sup>

Whew! That’s is a big load for one concept to carry!—and yet this is exactly the freight that we want the idea of “character” to carry.

Current psychiatric terminology calls *thumos* ‘narcissism’. Narcissism is simply a new word for an old concept: ‘*thumos*’ from Homer, Plato, Aristotle and the Athenian tragic poets; ‘pride or vainglory’ from Hobbes; ‘*amour-propre*’ from Rousseau; ‘desire for recognition’ from Hegel; ‘narcissism’ from psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut who developed and fundamentally modified Freud’s ideas.

I much prefer Homer’s term *thumos* to the modern psycho-jargon, narcissism, because of the ways the latter term has been pathologized and turned into a general-purpose blame-word. These thinkers, over 3,000 years from Homer to Kohut, have seen this feature of mental life as normal and universal, even if it can develop dangerous

---

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle scholar, Professor Eugene Garver of St Johns University in Minnesota, has done a meticulous analysis of Aristotle’s scandalous concept of the “natural slave”—someone with deficient energy infusing *thumos*. He then concludes with the deliciously subversive observation that Aristotle’s description of the “natural slave” is a perfect fit to the modern bureaucrat!

excesses, deficiencies, or deformities. I believe that *thumos* is a human universal that evolved out of warfare in our ancestral evolutionary past and still explodes in killing rage, when it is violated.

Many cultural, legal, and social changes have more or less removed these reactions from the *individual* realm—we no longer teach our children that a man of honor *must* kill someone who makes a joke at his expense, or who steals food from his cupboard, but such reactions are very much alive at the *collective* level, and [lamentably] are regarded as patriotic and virtuous.

The normal adult's cloak of safety and guarantor of his or her narcissistic stability is the society's image of "what's right" *and* the implementation of "what's right" by power holders, along with concrete social support of a face-to-face community to whom one is attached. Narcissism, allegedly the most 'primitive' of psychological phenomena, is much entwined with the body, but it is just as deeply enmeshed in the social, moral, and political.

So here is my proposed definition of *thumos* for modern practical use, at the same time accommodating Homer and Aristotle without doing them any violence:

- The historically and socio-culturally constructed *content* embodied in *ideals, ambitions, and attachments*
- The intensity with which these commitments are energized [a strength/weakness dimension, independent of content]

In the normal adult world cognitive appraisals control thumotic emotions and moods—specifically cognitive appraisals of agency in and of the direction of change and rate of change in the condition of *ideals, ambitions, and attachments* in the world. This is a big lump to swallow all at once, but the basic ingredients are simple and familiar: Are my ideals, ambitions, attachments improving or deteriorating in the real world? If so, how fast? How much? Who is doing this, and why?

During my years in the veterans clinic, I became fascinated with what I now call moral injury, which, *pace* Plato, lay at the root of the veterans' deformities of character. My current *preventive* psychiatry work is presented to military forces as “the prevention of psychological *and moral* injury.”

I also confess a grandiose desire to understand the totality of this terrible/wonderful creature, this human being. My early studies with Talcott Parsons both encouraged this insane ambition and gave it a formal framework, which assists me to this day. Parsons called himself a sociologist, but he should be identified rather as a philosopher—well, he *did* study briefly with Karl Jaspers in the 1920s—and I consider myself an unlicensed philosopher. Psychological and moral injuries in war are a fertile a place to observe and learn the obligatory exchanges among brain, mind, society, and culture. This wonderful, terrible creature, this human, comes vividly into view at the crossroads we call traumatic stress studies.

The breadth of the Homeric usages seems both useful and truthful to me. The 700+ occurrences of the word *thumos* are almost all emotionally charged, but with the whole range of emotions that you would expect from what I have just said: love and pity as well as anger and fear, joy as well as sorrow, elation and despair. I want to restore this breadth to any current use of the term, although today's symposium will necessarily focus on rage: a state arising when there has been a sudden, high-stakes destruction in the realm of ideals, ambitions or attachments

*and* an agent of this change has been identified. Achilles identifies Hector and all Trojans as the agent of Patroklos's death. Patroklos is his foster brother, second-in-command, and closest comrade in arms.

Plato uses *thumos* primarily in an anger-riddled martial context, to which Aristotle necessarily had to respond. But Aristotle returned to the broader Homeric use, as you heard in the earlier quotation, but then he abstracted it to the capacity to have emotions at all.

*Thumos* is thus a container for the English word 'character'. Character exists in dynamic relation to the ecology of social power, modeled and remodeled throughout life by how well or badly those who hold power fulfill the culture's moral order.

This allows us then to define "moral injury" as that state that arises in a person when he or she has suffered [1] a betrayal of "what's right" [something in the *culture*] [2] by a person or social institution with legitimate authority [something in the *social system*] [3] in a situation with high-stakes for the injured person [the stakes

reside in the *mind* of the injured person, despite their social and cultural origins]. When all three of these are present, the body reacts as if a physical attack is under way [this neural and humoral response is controlled by the *brain*]. There you have the human critter as a whole—culture, society, mind, brain—with none of these having ontologic priority as being “really real” with the others being merely epiphenomenal.

Parsons taught that brain, mind, society, culture, are each other’s *environments* and must exchange suitable inputs and outputs with each other, if they are to persist in time. I would add that in the sense of biological evolution, they all *co-evolved* at the same time: when the physically modern human first appeared in the Upper Paleolithic, all four were fully present. There never has been a time when a member of our species had a third of a language [of which normative orders are a particular manifestation], an eighth of a mind or half of a social system. If you take the view that the physical brain is “prior” to the artifacts that it creates and makes possible, I point out that this is true, but only in a trivial sense. It is a general biological phenomenon that evolving organisms both adapt to their “thrown” environment but create the environment to which

they adapt.

The termite's physical body and nervous system and its astonishingly engineered nest co-evolved in relation to each other, and remain interactively dependent upon each other. Termites and nest are parts of the same lifecycle. It is true in one sense to say that the termite is prior to its nest in the sense that, if you kill all the termites, the nest cannot regenerate them. If you destroy the nest, the termites can sometimes regenerate it; but if you prevent the regeneration of the nest, the existing termites die out without reproducing. Nest and termite have co-evolved. Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, famously said, a nest is a [molecular] gene's way of making another gene, but the philosophers of biology have shown that there is equal truth content in the flipped-over statement: a gene is a nest's way of making another nest.

The so-called Evo-Devo—shorthand for evolutionary-developmental community in embryology has shown that it is possible to do rigorous science at the boundaries of biological systems that reciprocally shape each other and depend upon the nature and timing of their interchanges. Viewing interacting systems as

equal in their ontologic standing is not a formula for mushy, “whatever floats your boat” handwaving eclecticism, but a call to develop and conduct good science. Molecular genetic reductionists in the life sciences has left us waist-deep in promissory notes that they will never be able to redeem.

If “Evo-Devo” is a recently-begun project in the biological sciences, it is a to-be-resumed project in the study of the human phenomenon as a whole. I am greatly heartened by the return of the interdisciplinary spirit and of epigenetic observations.

Well, I have flown far into the outer space of abstract concepts, and want to close by bringing it back to earth.

In *Achilles in Vietnam* I described a rare state of solitary rabid killing frenzy that can arise in war when a soldier has experienced betrayal of what’s right by a commander in a situation involving the death of a beloved comrade. I used the Norse term “berserker” for this. The berserk phenomenon has riveted people’s attention to a degree far out of proportion to its occurrence, which is rather rare. Gun-murder rampages anywhere in the world invariably generate a flurry

of references to the berserk state. These rampages are horrible and tragic, but frankly, they are not the stuff of my own nightmares.

What keeps me awake at night is a post-military phenomenon that Germans experienced first-hand during the 1920's, the *Freikorps*. Today we would refer to these as right-wing paramilitary death squads. I fear that the historical, social, economic, and cultural conditions in America are now strongly favorable to the formation of such gangs. What I have to say will be an illustration of the ways that the interdisciplinary analysis I sketched out abstractly above can be applied to a very practical real-world need.

According to historian Bruce Gudmundsson, when regular divisions of the Reichsheer were demobilized after World War I, on the whole they returned from war as units to the geographically compact regions from which they had originally been stood up. Their reintegration into civilian life was fostered by the social bonds that they had formed by training together, going to war together, and coming home together. Their reintegration was even fairly smooth in places where the hometowns lay on the other side of redrawn national boundaries. According to

Gudmundsson, these regular soldiers were poor candidates for attraction into the *Freikorps*, and like. In contrast, recruits to the elite *Jaeger* and Naval Infantry units were drawn into these formations as individual volunteers from throughout the *Reichsheer*, and were demobilized as individuals, and scattered as individuals across Germany. These were particularly responsive to recruitment into the elite patriotic ideology and tightly cohesive group practices of the *Freikorps*.

The thought of such a phenomenon in America makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Here is my analysis and my practical conclusions:

The analogous group at greatest risk of attraction to such formations in the United States is not so much freshly demobilized veterans of elite military formations, such as Army Special Forces, Navy Seals, Marine Delta Force, but rather the tens of thousands of armed private military contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan—the “trigger-pullers” among the contractors. Most of these will have had prior military service, but will have few persisting social links to their earlier military units. They will come home alone, carrying whatever psychological and moral injuries they

have suffered as contractors. If they were to ask for mental health treatment, their eligibility for treatment by the US government veterans health plan known as the VA, would be greatly in doubt, and their former contract employer has no legal obligation to provide mental health benefits, heightening whatever indignant rage they carried from their moral injuries. This would render them extremely vulnerable to recruitment to violent political [and also criminal] gangs. While I do not regard formal mental health treatment as a cure-all for such a potentially dangerous problem, any incremental societal risk-reduction is worth pursuing, especially if it involves the fostering of stable communities of such veterans in a context that remains open to the wider world. My clinical observation is that recognition by peers in a stable community of peers is the most potent anti-inflammatory treatment for injured *thumos*.

When I proposed extending VA mental health benefits to these contractor veterans to various US Congressional staff members I have worked with, the reactions ranged from intense interest and support to the angry retort “Another f—ing handout to the contractors!” This staffer wanted them to be liable for providing such benefits.

Reconnecting these contractor-veterans to military unit associations reflecting their prior military service might also satisfy their *Sehnsucht nach Anerkennung*. Willard Waller, a WWI US infantry veteran-turned-sociologist, wrote in his classic 1944 book, *The Veteran Comes Back*, that “the veteran comes home angry.” He pointed out that organized groups of veterans may be noisy, demanding, and annoying, but that their mutual support and recognition assuages the most dangerous excesses of their anger.

The typical American psychiatrist, faced with an angry, “narcissistic” veteran, cannot see beyond the end of the pen with which he writes out a prescription to modify some chemicals in the veteran’s brain. We are so much better able to do something constructive with and for our fellow humans if we see all four avatars—brain, mind society, culture—at once. This leads to better science, better clinical decisions, better public policy. I hope I have transmitted to you some of my enthusiasm for this way of thinking.

Now I would like to hear your comments, questions, and criticisms. Thank you.