Heroic Qualities

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1. Definition

In the course of heroization processes, heroizing communities often ascribe to heroic figures certain properties that either seemingly or actually characterise the figure as a hero or (help to) explain the figure's hero status. We call these properties "heroic qualities". Some of the categories of these qualities are physical (e.g. strength), moral and character-related (e.g. virtuousness, bravery), behavioural (e.g. a dominant or modest bearing), intellectual (e.g. wisdom, cunning) as well as affective and aesthetic (e.g. beauty, radiance). In some cases, these qualities can even be certain abilities (e.g. magical powers).

The heroizing effect of such qualitative attributions does not depend on whether they objectively describe the heroized figure, but whether the heroizing collective believes them to be true and accepts them as truthful statements about a hero. Those wanting to heroize a person have two basic argumentative approaches available to them: on the one hand, they can explain a figure's hero status using the qualities that they are claiming the figure has. In this case, the ascribed qualities *explain* the heroization. ("She/he is brave and devoted and is a hero(ine) because of it.") On the other hand, the heroizing parties can derive a figure's characteristics from their hero status. In this case, the attributed qualities *mark* the figure as a hero and make a heroization plausible after the fact. ("She/he is a hero and is brave and devoted because of it.")

Heroizing communities often claim or perceive heroic qualities to be essential, intrinsic traits of heroes. This essentialisation gives legitimacy to the heroic qualities and allows them to appear as universal, inherent properties of the 'hero personality'. In some historical contexts, however, an awareness for the constructive and attributive character of hero qualities also comes to light, for

instance in the notion that a heroic status can be attained within a community by acquiring and accumulating many positive traits. In addition, situational gradations, variations, or bundles of heroic qualities can be deduced from a generalised catalogue of traits. This allows communities to distinguish between different types of heroes in which, depending on the context, certain traits are weighted higher or lower or in which certain traits are even elevated to a 'heroic quality' in the first place. Thus, the qualities attributed in a given context become an indicator of the different expectations that communities have of different kinds of heroic figures. One example of this is the model of the *grand homme*, which emerged in Europe in the 18th century. The *grand homme* was admired for his intellectual capability, political talent and moral virtue. While the war hero, with his traditional qualities such as the capacity to fight and a noble lineage, did not become meaningless at the same time as the model of the *grand homme* emerged, he did experience a noticeable devaluation (see part 3.2.).

In such processes of change and revaluation, heroic qualities – like other phenomena of the heroic – often become the object of debate, both between different groups and within communities. Not just the question of which qualities a hero must have can be contentious, but also the meaning attached to each quality. One recent example of such a debate is the "*Disput in Briefen*" (dispute in letters) held between Dieter Thomä and Ulrich Bröckling that dealt with, among other questions, whether hero figures, who distinguish themselves through such traits as a willingness to take risks, exemplariness, and affective and mobilising power, align with the principles and aims of contemporary democratic societies.[1] But even in older sources, the negotiation processes in which certain notions of heroes and attributions of heroic qualities crystallise are palpable (see part 3.2.). Such examples illustrate that heroic qualities should not be understood as constants transcending time and cultures, but as variable attributions that are subject to both synchronic competition as well as diachronic change.

2. Heroic qualities as analytical heuristics

One of the central theses of the SFB 948 is that the transcultural, transhistorical phenomenon of the heroic cannot be explained from the properties of individual heroes, but through the heroization processes that occur in a relational framework between heroized figure, heroizing community and further actors.[2] Every hero figure with their individual qualities only arises as the result of these constitutive processes. Furthermore, these figures can be described using a set of typological characteristics (e.g. exceptionality, moral potential, agonality, transgressiveness, strong human agency, etc.).[3]

Nevertheless, the qualities of individual heroes can be made productive for the analysis of the heroic if they are seen as acts of ascription to the heroized figure and thus as a significant (though not strictly necessary) element of heroization processes. In contrast to the relational and typological models proposed by the SFB 948 that aim to identify universal properties of heroization processes and of the hero figures produced in them, an approach focused on heroic qualities directs attention to the unique case, which is always marked by coincidence[4] and contingency. Through this focus, heroic qualities can be a heuristic for understanding the culture- and group-specific reification of the heroic and the singularity of heroization processes. The ascription of heroic qualities is an expression of how a community describes its heroines and heroes and which collective needs they project onto those figures. Heroic qualities thus become a key to understanding the social and cultural conditions in which certain hero conceptions can become manifest, and they provide insight into the heroizing community's values, norms and challenges.

At the same time, heroic qualities allow for a comparative perspective on the cultural and historical variability and plurality of heroization processes: what a community calls a trait of a hero in a specific context need not necessarily be considered a heroic quality under different circumstances (see part

3.1.). Moreover, there are heroizations in which no specific heroic qualities are ascribed at all. Precisely because of their variety, attributions of heroic qualities can serve as analytically interesting indicators of the varying needs and moods of different communities as well as of how they construct hero figures.

3. Catalogues of heroic qualities and hero definitions

Heroic qualities were and are used in popular culture just as in academic discourse to define what a hero is. Collections and lists of heroic qualities can be found in numerous historical sources, increasingly since the early modern period, but also in contemporary discourse about the heroic. The reference to hero qualities in these sources generally does not serve to shed light on the heterogeneity and contingency of notions of heroes. On the contrary, catalogues of heroic qualities are used to define the heroic descriptively or normatively and with virtually universal pretension, i.e. to specify characteristics by which heroes are always recognisable or that they always must have. Different types of heroes are also frequently distinguished using specific heroic qualities or combinations of qualities that are deemed to be characteristic for a given type.

Such 'prescriptive' approaches are different from the perspective proposed above to consider heroic qualities as heuristics for the cultural plurality and variability of heroizations. However, we understand the evident efforts in many societies to produce catalogues of heroic qualities to be proof of a transcultural, transhistorical need to define the phenomenon of the heroic, or to at least make its variety manageable by forming typologies.[5] Such historical and contemporary catalogues have an important heuristic function for the study of heroization processes. With their help, the values and beliefs of heroizing communities as well as the changing arenas in which heroes are produced can be understood. Using qualitative determinations of the hero or *heros* in different historical contexts as examples, this analytical potential is illustrated below.

3.1. Heroic qualities in antiquity[6]

Originally, in Greek antiquity, the term *heros* was used almost exclusively to denote concrete figures of myth, epic or the religious world (sacralisation). One of the few early passages in which 'heroic' is used as an attribute of outstanding individuals is found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (7.1145a–20) from the 4th century BC. Using the example of the Homeric hero Hector, Aristotle defines the highest form of *areté* (virtue, excellence) as "superhuman, to an extent heroic and divine virtue". Aristotle understands the particular "heroic" virtue as a potential inherent in heroes that makes it possible for them to surpass all other virtuous individuals and come close to the divine.

Summary lists of the qualities of heroes are hardly found in ancient literature, but the traits of individual heroes are described frequently. There are plenty examples of what excellence and exceptional capability was ascribed to ancient heroes in overcoming adversities, but in many cases these heroes also have dubious qualities, like Achilles, Aeneas, Heracles and Odysseus show: "Achilles, like all Greek heroes, is neither 'good' in an ethical sense, nor successful in a more general sense, but is overly 'large' in an objective, 'anthropological' sense."[7] The main quality of many ancient heroes seems to be their ability to have an impact beyond their death and to intervene directly in the world of the living – regardless of the type of impact and whether it seems positive or negative to the living. In the 5th century BC, Herodotus (*Histories* IX.120.2) tells that Protesilaus, a hero who had fallen during the Trojan War, gave signs to the living even after his death by causing fish being fried in a pan to move. Although Protesilaus was dead and a "dry corpse" (*tárichos*), he still had power (*dýnamis*) given to him by the gods.

There are even examples of morally problematic figures that were labelled heroes, but from a

modern perspective might be seen as "anti-heroes". For instance, in the 5th century BC, the wrestler Kleomedes of Astypalaia incurred the wrath of his fellow citizens by first cheating at the Olympic games and then, in a frenzied rage, causing a schoolhouse to collapse, killing the children who were inside. Kleomedes allegedly fled from his irate pursuers into a chest and, when they forced it open, he had suddenly disappeared. The Oracle of Delphi was then asked for guidance and gave this explanation of the miracle: Kleomedes was a *heros* and therefore ought to be honoured with sacrifices. Thus, in addition to his supernatural physical strength and size, the characteristic qualities of this heroic figure that can be inferred from the primary sources are a manic propensity to violence, a willingness to break the rules and an ability to disappear for which his contemporaries required explanation, rendering him "neither dead nor living" (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6.9.6–8; Plutarch, *Romulus* 27.3–28.5).

Explicit definitions of heroes and specific lists of their qualities are found in medieval encyclopaedias that draw on ancient sources. Those definitions ascribe to heroes a power transcending death, in addition to attributes such as strength, a noble descent and wisdom in some instances.[8] In the 7th century AD, Isidore of Sevilla described heroes in his *Etymologiae* (8, 11, 98) as "celestial men" (*viri aerii*, perhaps in the sense of 'deceased') who are "worthy of the skies" (*caelo digni*) because of their wisdom (*sapientia*) and their strength (*fortitudo*, similar to the Greek *dýnamis*) – the Christian influence becomes evident here. In the *Suda*, a 10th-century Byzantine lexicon compiled from earlier sources, *héros* is defined as a "demigod" (*hemítheos*), "powerful" (*dynatós*) and "of distinguished parentage" (*gennaíos*).[9] However, the plural *héroas* can, according to the *Suda*, also refer to the "souls of the deceased" – a semantical extension that the term did not begin to undergo until the 4th century BC.

In such qualitative definitions, it becomes clear that ancient and modern notions of the heroic are in no way congruent, that they are even widely divergent in some points.[10] Ancient heroes appear primarily as mythical and exceptional individuals whose greatness, in particular their powers and qualities, is closer to the divine than it is to the mortal, and whose evaluation often remains ambivalent. A distinction between heroes as religious, mythical and exemplary figures was not clearly pronounced. The *heros* was thus, in contrast to many modern hero figures, not primarily an imitable role model, and some of his most striking, transgressive and superhuman capabilities – for instance intervening in the world of the living from beyond death – are alien to modern notions of the heroic. Some qualities ascribed to heroes since the early modern period were already significant in antiquity, and many ancient ideas, like the Aristotelian ideal of heroic virtue, were seized on later. But this does not change the fact that ancient and modern conceptions of the hero are fundamentally different.

3.2. Catalogues of heroic traits in dictionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries

In the late 17th century, Latin lexica were defining the hero using two characteristics: his particular virtuousness ("qui virtutibus supra communem sortem excellit"[11]) and his holiness or godliness ("vir sanctus"[12]). These definitions draw on the notion of a *virtus heroica* that traces its origins back to Aristotle and was still influential in early modern Europe. *Virtus heroica* denoted a particular degree of 'heroic' virtue that surpasses all other virtues and deifies anyone who has it (see above and the article on heroic virtue in Catholicism and Protestantism and as a princely virtue).

In the 18th century, *virtus heroica* gradually lost importance as a central quality of the hero. Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon* (1735) no longer defined the hero as virtuous, but on the basis of his deeds and natural beauty, strength and bravery: "A hero is someone who has been gifted by nature with an impressive figure and exquisite bodily strength; has achieved fame through brave deeds and has risen above the common state of man."[13] In his *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der*

Hochdeutschen Mundart (2nd edition, 1793–1801), however, Johann Christoph Adelung historicised these attributions of heroic qualities: although the understanding of the hero as a brave "individual gifted with excellent bodily strength had formerly been very current", heroes were seen in Adelung's time primarily as individuals possessing an "excellent heartiness", i.e. courage and resolve, "particularly whenever they dutifully made use of it for the benefit of many", meaning applying their resolve in the service of the general good.[14] Adelung's distinction between older and younger notions of heroism indicates that the history of heroic qualities certainly cannot be written as a continuous history of naive essentialisation, rather that an awareness of the mutability and constructedness of heroic figures also appears in premodern contexts in some cases.

The "héros" article in the 8th volume of Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* published in 1765 presents an outstanding document distinguishing between different types of heroes that are characterised extensively by specific qualities.[15] The article's author, Chevalier Louis de Jaucourt, begins by describing the (war) hero, who distinguished himself with outstanding military talents and virtues such as bravery, courage, audacity, knowledge of the art of war and military genius. ("[Les] guerriers, qui portent au plus haut degré les talens & les vertus militaires. […] la bravoure, le courage, souvent la témérité, la connoissance de l'art de la guerre, & le génie militaire, caractérisent davantage le héros"). These qualities of war heroes, however, were – as the author remarks with the critical impetus of an Enlightenment writer – "often only happy crimes in the eyes of wisdom that have wrongly appropriated the designation of virtue". ("[…] vertus qui souvent aux yeux de la sagesse, ne sont que des crimes heureux qui ont usurpé le nom de vertus.") Jaucourt contrived the *grand homme* as a positive counter-model to the war hero: a civilian hero characterised by his intellectual genius and moral virtuousness who, out of fine and noble motives, fights for the public good, the glory of his prince, the prosperity of the state, and the fortune of the people, and in so doing demonstrates humanity, gentleness and patriotism. ("Le grand homme […] joint aux talens & au génie la plûpart des vertus morales ; il n'a dans sa conduite que de beaux & de nobles motifs ; il n'écoute que le bien public, la gloire de son prince, la prospérité de l'état, & le bonheur des peuples. […] Enfin, l'humanité, la douceur, le patriotisme réunis aux talens, sont les vertus d'un grand-homme.") Jaucourt emphasises, however, that the original meaning of the hero consisted precisely in the connection of martial, moral and political virtues, as well as in the ability to bear setbacks with steadfastness and confront dangers with resolve. ("[L]e terme de héros, dans son origine, étoit consacré à celui qui réunissoit les vertus guerrieres aux vertus morales & politiques ; qui soutenoit les revers avec constance, & qui affrontoit les périls avec fermeté.") This was still the case with many ancient heroes, such as Hercules, Theseus and Jason, according to Jaucourt. He sees in them the prototype of a "perfect hero", who embodies the aspects of both the war hero and the *grand homme* and fights for the public good with sincere love. ("[M]ais le parfait héros, est celui qui joint à toute la capacité, & à toute la valeur d'un grand capitaine, un amour & un desir sincere de la félicité publique.")

In Germany and France in the 18th century, it was typical to contrast the war hero, who was increasingly seen as antiquated, with a new conception of the hero as a genius or a *grand homme*, who with his intellectual works or political achievements became a driver of historical, social and cultural transformation. That comparison still echoed in 1877 in the Grimm brothers' *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, which also defined the "hero" as "the warrior who stands out for his bravery and adeptness in combat" and as the "man of noble descent". This interconnection between martial heroism and qualities such as masculinity and noble ancestry at first appears to exclude other forms of the heroic – particularly civic heroism and female heroes. However, by noting that the martial hero type was to be found primarily in the "legends of the past", the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* simultaneously marks this notion as being anachronistic. Against the foil of the war hero, the Grimm lexicon then identifies two further hero types: first, the "hero in the religious sense", which can refer to Christ, but also to the angels, God Himself and the martyrs. Second, the Grimms find a "metaphorical"

designation of heroes that appears to implicitly refer to the genius and *grand homme*, in addition to opening up the heroic not just for bourgeois protagonists, but also for everyday heroism: "hero is conferred to anyone who achieves something magnificent, outstanding in any area, e.g. something good and useful."[16]

Highlighting these few definitions of hero found in dictionaries certainly does not provide any comprehensive picture of notions of the heroic in the 18th and 19th centuries. Nevertheless, a pronounced awareness for both the plurality and the historicity of hero conceptions and qualities shows in the definitions cited here. At the same time, a changed understanding of the hero is indicated that is no longer based primarily on such qualities as 'heroic virtuousness', martial talent and noble ancestry. The somewhat normative devaluation of the war hero who distinguishes himself through physical strength and bravery and the simultaneous appreciation of the *grand homme* who serves the community with political and intellectual achievements might be understood as a symptom of an increasingly assertive bourgeois class or of an enlightened privileging of reason over body. At the same time, a number of definitions revive the virtuousness of the hero, but with a different intent: that quality was now measured against the hero's moral disposition, his endurance and the utility of his achievements for the community.

3.3. "Hero features" in experimental psychology

In the 21st century, empirical studies in the field of psychology and semantic prototypes opened up an entirely different methodological approach to heroes and the qualities ascribed to them. These studies attempt to identify the cognitive representations of heroes in a more or less representative cross section of a population by means of elaborate surveys. For example, in a series of studies conducted on several hundred participants in the Irish city of Limerick, Kinsella et al. (2015a, 2015b, 2017) discovered what they called "central hero features" that the respondents associated with heroic figures:

> *brave, moral integrity, conviction, courageous, self-sacrifice,*
> *protecting, honest, selfless, determined, saves others, inspiring, helpful.*

Additionally, the authors identified other "peripheral features of heroes" that they also categorised as relevant, but less significant:

> *proactive, humble, strong, risk-taker, fearless, caring, powerful, compassionate,*
> *leadership skills, exceptional, intelligent, talented, personable.*[17]

A similar catalogue of characteristics of the heroic that matched that of Kinsella et al. to an extent had already been compiled by Allison/Goethals (2011) by surveying 125 students in the US. They arrive at the list of the "Great Eight traits of heroes", to each of which they cluster additional qualities:

> "*Smart*: intelligent, smart, wise
> *Strong*: strong, leader, dominating, courageous, gallant
> *Selfless*: moral, honest, selfless, humble, altruistic
> *Caring*: compassionate, empathetic, caring, kind
> *Charismatic*: eloquent, charismatic, dedicated, passionate
> *Resilient*: determined, persevering, resilient, accomplished
> *Reliable*: loyal, true, reliable
> *Inspiring*: admirable, amazing, great, inspirational"[18]

These experimentally identified, prototypical catalogues of traits list almost exclusively positive character qualities that contend that the hero is primarily an individual who is committed to their

community in an exemplary and imitable fashion. To a large extent, this characterisation corresponds to the argument put forward by American "heroism science" that heroes can be identified primarily using their "prosocial behavior" and their disposition to "risk-taking" or even to "self-sacrifice".[19]

However, in the empirically compiled catalogues, aspects of the triumphant, the transgressive and the violent are hardly discernible that would leave heroes appearing in an ambivalent light. Moreover, the scope of the studies remains limited to a narrow social, cultural and geographical context due to their methodological approach and the selection of the respondents. Finally, the authors do not attempt to differentiate between culturally contingent and generalisable hero qualities. It can be assumed that the surveys would have uncovered other "hero features" if they had been conducted in other cultural and historical contexts.

Therefore, what is notable about the studies by Kinsella et al. and Allison/Goethals is less the findings themselves than the premises on which the studies are based. The approach selected by the researchers reduces the complex phenomenon of the heroic to the individual properties of heroic figures. The surveyed respondents seemed to not find it difficult to comply with the request and to produce an entire catalogue of traits that they saw as characteristic for heroes. Both the researchers and the surveyed laypeople thus link the heroic with the heroized figure itself, its mental dispositions and character traits.

4. References

1   See Bröckling, Ulrich / Thomä, Dieter: "Warum Helden? Ein Disput in Briefen". In: Neue Rundschau 132.1 (2021), 7-27.
2   See von den Hoff, Ralf et al.: "Heroes – Heroizations – Heroisms: Transformations and Conjunctures from Antiquity to Modernity: Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948". In: Falkenhayner, Nicole / Meurer, Sebastian / Schlechtriemen, Tobias (Eds.): Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories (= helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu den Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 [2019]), 9-16. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02.
3   See Schechtriemen, Tobias: "The Hero as an Effect: Boundary Work in Processes of Heroization". In: Falkenhayner, Nicole / Meurer, Sebastian / Schlechtriemen, Tobias (Eds.): Analyzing Processes of Heroization. Theories, Methods, Histories (= helden. heroes. héros. E-Journal zu den Kulturen des Heroischen. Special Issue 5 [2019]), 17-26. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/03.
4   Heroic qualities can be understood as 'contingent attributions' in which the relational and typological traits of heroic figures are reified specific to a given culture; for more on this, see the Compendium heroicum s.v. Hero, part 1.
5   For more on the need to form typologies, see Bröckling, Ulrich: Postheroische Helden. Ein Zeitbild. Berlin 2020: Suhrkamp, 69-71.
6   The part on attributions of heroic qualities in antiquity is essentially based on notes and case studies provided by Stefan Tilg and in particular Ralf von den Hoff.
7   Hölscher, Tonio: Krieg und Kunst im antiken Griechenland und Rom. Heldentum, Identität, Herrschaft, Ideologie. Berlin 2019: De Gruyter, 81.
8   See also s.v. 'heros' in the Thesaurus Linguae Latinae, which is a modern lexicon, but provides a good overview of the classic Latin categories and epithets of the heroic thanks to its groupings of the word material – Kornhardt: 'hērōs'. In: Thesaurus Linguae Latinae Online, vol. 6, 3, 2661-2664. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1938. Online at: https://tll.degruyter.com/article/6_3_14_heros_v2007 (accessed on 21.10.2022).
9   Suda On Line, Eta 556, online

at: http://www.cs.uky.edu/~raphael/sol/sol-cgi-bin/search.cgi?login=guest&enlogin=guest&db=REAL&field=adlerhw_gr&searchstr=eta,556 (accessed on 21.10.2022).

10 See Himmelmann, Nikolaus: Der ausruhende Herakles. Paderborn 2009: Schöningh.

11 "Heros". In: Micraelius, Lexicon philosophicum terminorum philosophis usitatorum. Stettin 1661, 562. Online at: http://diglib.hab.de/wdb.php?dir=drucke/201-29-quod&end=867 (accessed on 2.12.2022).

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16 "HELD, m.". In: Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm, digitalisierte Fassung im Wörterbuchnetz des Trier Center for Digital Humanities, Version 01/21. Online at: https://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?lemid=H05741 (accessed on 2.12.2022). The *Deutsches Wörterbuch* then provides another two alternative definitions of hero, namely the protagonist of a (literary) narrative and 'even generalised in earlier language to the term man'. (ibid.)

17 Kinsella, Elaine et al. 2017: "Attributes and Applications of Heroes. A Brief History of Lay and Academic Perspectives". In: Allison, Scott / Goethals, George R. / Kramer, Roderick M. (Eds.): Handbook of Heroism and Heroic Leadership. New York 2017: Routledge, 19-35, 22. The authors note regarding the hero qualities they identified: "Interestingly, the list of central and peripheral features represents characteristics that [are] stereotypically masculine (brave, protecting, strong, fearless) and female (helpful, selfless, caring, compassionate) which perhaps challenges a view that heroes are conceptualized in exclusively masculine terms." (ibid.); see also Kinsella, Elaine et al. 2015a: "Zeroing in on Heroes: A Prototype Analysis of Hero Features". In: Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 108, 114-127. DOI: 10.1037/a0038463; Kinsella, Elaine et al. 2015b: "Lay Perspectives on the Social and Psychological Functions of Heroes". In: Frontiers in Psychology, 6, 130. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00130.

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19 See e.g. Franco, Zeno / Blau, Kathy / Zimbardo, Philip: Heroism: A Conceptual Analysis and Differentiation Between Heroic Action and Altruism. In: Review of General Psychology 15.2 (2011), 99-113, 100. DOI: 10.1037/a0022672; Best, Joel: Everyone's a Winner. Life in Our Congratulatory Culture. Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 2011: University of California Press, 93-94.

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