IN SEARCH OF THUMOS:
TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF A GREEK PSYCHOLOGICAL TERM

John P. Lynch and Gary B. Miles

ΘΥΜΟΣ: soul, spirit, as the principle of life, feeling and thought, especially of strong feeling and passion: I. in physical sense, 1) breath, life (used of both animals and humans). 2) spirit, strength. 3) heart.

II. soul, as shown by the feelings and passions; and so, 1) desire or inclination, especially desire for meat or drink, appetite. 2) mind, temper or will. 3) spirit, courage. 4) the seat of anger, hence anger and in the plural fits of anger, passions. 5) the heart, as the seat of the emotions, especially joy or grief. 6) mind, soul, as the seat of thought.

The above is a summary of the Greek word thumos (θυμός) as it appears in Liddell and Scott’s unabridged Greek-English Lexicon. The lexicographical breakdown of possible meanings gives a rough idea of the semantic space which thumos occupied. It is obvious that no one English word comes close to covering the exact same range of meaning; translations of thumos into English will vary considerably even within the same literary work. This is of course to say only that a word is a dynamic phenomenon and that it would be strange to find, especially within two cultures far removed in place and date, two words which manifested their dynamism in exactly parallel extensions of the same root idea. Or, to say the same thing more briefly from a different point of view: traductor proditor, the translator is the betrayer.

After memorizing a handy translation or standard definition for thumos, a student of Greek has to feel his way into the whole complex of references, associations, and extensions which we call a word’s ‘meaning’. This is no easy task, especially in a language as remote as Ancient Greek. Helpful as Liddell and Scott’s breakdown of literary usages is, the peculiar dynamism of words like thumos easily escapes the confines of lexicographical classification. Part of the problem in coming to terms with thumos and other Greek words lies with us—in the difficulty we have at this stage in human history escaping our own preconceptions about the reference of words like ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, and ‘mind’. If we fail to get past Judaeo-Christian, psychoanalytic, or other peculiarly modern ways of understanding such words, we become the victims of our own handy translations, our standard definitions prove to be blinders rather than telescopes. In the particular case of the word thumos one suspects that another obstacle in the process of understanding results from confusion among the Greeks themselves about the reference of thumos. ‘Confusion’ perhaps is too
misleading a word, implying as it does that a word's meaning must have neatly defined limits; but it may help to point up this aspect of the problem from our point of view: as A.W.H. Adkins' useful discussion of Homeric psychology makes clear in From the Many to the One (Ithaca, New York, 1970) pp.14-26, *thumos* is a word which accounted for something in man's internal life before much was known about human physiology and before interior forces were highly differentiated by conceptual analysis. We should at least be careful not to demand a physiologically exact reference for *thumos*; nor should we think of it as part of an elaborately articulated vocabulary dealing with spiritual life. If we are to come any closer to understanding the behaviour of *thumos* as a complex of meaning, other resources beyond the scope of Liddell and Scott’s *Lexicon* need to be employed.

Comparative linguistics can help to illuminate the root meaning of *thumos*. Since Greek belongs to that family of languages which are commonly called ‘Indo-European’ (or ‘Indo-Germanic’ or even ‘Indo-Aryan’), it might be possible to find in related languages cognates of Greek *thumos* which would allow comparative linguists to reconstruct the original (‘Proto-Indo-European’) form of the word. More than that, the meanings which cognate words assume in other languages help suggest the basic underlying reference of the Indo-European root. To consider the meaning of a word from the standpoint of its Indo-European etymology, the standard reference work is Julius Pokorny’s *Indogermanische Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern and Munich, 1959), a helpful tool for recovering root meanings in Indo-European words, though it is one that must be used with caution because of the speculative nature of its enterprise.

According to Pokorny, (Vol. I, 261-263) a number of words in other Indo-European languages are cognate with Greek *thumos*. When the forms of these cognates are brought together and analyzed, the original form of the root can be reconstructed as *dheu*-. From the meanings assumed by this root in various Indo-European languages, it would appear that the basic sense of *dheu*- in the parent language was ‘to move suddenly’ or ‘to swirl’, used especially to denote elemental movement such as that of dust, wind, smoke, or steam. This root meaning is in fact preserved in the Greek verb *thuō* (θυω), which meant primarily sudden or violent movement of elemental forces (‘rage’, ‘seethe’, etc., of earth, air, fire, or water) and secondarily had one of its possible versions, ‘to smoke’, extended in several directions: first, as a verb with causative force, ‘to make to smoke’; then in particular ‘to make a burnt offering’; and finally and most commonly ‘to sacrifice’ in general. From the Indo-European point of view, *thumos* turns out to be the very form of the root which gave Latin its word *fumus* and Sanskrit *dhumas*, both nouns meaning ‘smoke’.
Comparative linguistics, above and beyond information about root meanings, yields useful and interesting perspectives on the kind of word *thumos* originally was in Greek. Just as *thuō* conveyed the verbal sense of a particular kind of moving, *thumos* was the noun form of the root and may have originally meant 'that which moves', referring to a particular elemental form of motion. Interestingly enough, Plato's *Cratylus* (419e) suggests just this kind of linguistic development: *thumos*, Socrates says, took its name 'from the raging (*thusis*) and seething of the soul (*psuche*)'. Another possible line of development starts with the idea of 'smoke' (itself dependent upon the idea of movement) and leads from it to the notion of a breath of life, a 'breath-soul'. In either event, originally *thumos* was not a bodily organ or the seat of any emotion; it was rather a vital force in which vitality was defined in the elemental sense of motion. It is this general sense of vital motion which gives to *thumos* its uncommonly broad range of meaning; *thumos* seems to have been a word used not so much to differentiate a particular instance as to synthesize various manifestations of vital motion.

In Homer *thumos* is distinct from *psuche* and *noos* and yet it overlaps with both of them. In contrast to *psuche* ('breath of life'), which usually departs through the mouth, the *thumos* is normally represented as leaving the bones or limbs of the dead and is not mentioned as existing once outside the body. Occasionally, however, *thumos* and *psuche* seem to be almost interchangeable, since the *thumos* and the *psuche* are said to leave the body by identical routes. For example, at *Iliad* 22.67 Homer says, 'when someone by stroke or throw of the sharp bronze has bereft my *rhethe of thumos*', while at *Iliad* 16.856 he says, 'the soul flew down to Hades from the *rhethe*'. Moreover, the *thumos*, which usually seems to perish with the body, on a few occasions is described as surviving death as the *psuche* regularly does: at *Iliad* 7.131 we hear that 'his *thumos* escaped from his limbs down to Hades'. Bruno Snell in his well-known treatment of Homeric psychology, *Discovery of the Mind* (pp.9-12), argues that such apparent identification of *thumos* and *psuche* arises from a misunderstanding of the term *rhethe*. *Rhethe* originally means 'face' but was taken by later interpolators of the *Iliad* to mean 'limbs'. Once the notion was accepted that the *psuche* could leave from the limbs, the door was open to further confusion. Confusion or not, the fact that the two terms could sometimes be identified reveals one of the directions in which the meaning of *thumos* could be—and sometimes in Homer—was extended.

Another direction is apparent in the relation between *thumos* and *noos* ('mind'). As a general rule, emotions originate from the *thumos* and consequently the *thumos* is the source of non-rational motivation: 'when *thumos* commands you to drink' (*Iliad* 4.263), 'he wished with his *thumos*' (*Iliad* 16.255), 'angered in his *thumos*' (*Iliad* 1.429), 'take to yourself a gracious
thumos' (Iliad 9.639). The noos, on the other hand, is usually treated as the seat of understanding: 'he did not escape notice of Zeus' shrewd noos,' (II. 15.461). 'We have no noos or plan better than this,' (II. 15.509).

Nonetheless, there are occasions when such a neat distinction between thumos and noos is difficult to maintain. Agamemnon rejoices in his noos (Odyssey 8.78) or Menelaus, 'knew in his thumos that his brother was in trouble'. (Iliad 2.409). Once again, Snell argues (pp.12-13), that the specific circumstances justify such apparent exchange of function: Agamemnon's delight is based upon reflection; Menelaus' knowledge is based upon, 'his instincts, his brotherly sympathy'. The argument may have some validity, as it would in explaining instances of the English phrase 'to know in one's heart', but it should not obscure the dangers of distinguishing between thumos and noos rigidly or categorically. Like noos, thumos is related to man's psychological existence; like psuche, it is related to his physical existence. What distinguishes thumos from noos and psuche is not so much a specific difference between thumos and either noos or psuche (though differences do exist); the main point of differentiation is that thumos overlaps functions which each one (noos and psuche) performs exclusively of the other. Thumos signifies vital motion as it applies to both the physical and the psychological functions of man. Because of its range as an internal force, thumos is the most commonly used word to account for human psychology in the Homeric poems.

We can also learn something of thumos' meaning in Homer by considering the question of its location in the body. Like noos (Iliad 3.63), thumos is characteristically located in the breast. For example, 'He (Zeus) roused the thumos in his (Patroclus') breast' (Iliad 9.702). Nonetheless, it regularly leaves men via their bones or limbs: '(Peleus) would lift up his hands to the immortals in instant prayer that his thumos might depart from his limbs into the house of Hades' (Iliad 7.130-31). Thumos may be concentrated in the breast, but it infuses the entire body with vitality. Its departure is as much a sign of death as is the departure of psuche, which usually takes place through the mouth.

From the examples above, which could be easily compounded, it is clear that thumos cannot be restricted to a single function or location in the body, cannot be encompassed by a narrow definition. What unites all of its meanings is the elemental idea of vital motion in its broadest application. If we had to find a single English word which best rendered the basic sense of thumos in Homer, that word might well be 'energy', as it is used in everyday, non-scientific language, as when we speak of physical or psychic or nervous energy. Like thumos, our word energy is often used with convenient vagueness to refer to that force which activates body, heart, soul, and mind alike. Energy in everyday speech is not life itself, not emotion; but
it is some vital force which activates or gives motion to the physical and spiritual alike.

In attempting to discover the kind of word which thumos was in Greek, there is another important dimension to the inquiry, above and beyond the scope of Liddell and Scott’s English-Greek Lexicon and in addition to the insights which comparative Indo-European linguistics afford. That dimension is a historical perspective on the word as it developed in the hundreds of years of Greek literature between Homer and the early Christian writers. Even for understanding the word in Homer a historical perspective is important to keep in mind, since the Homeric poems are a repository of linguistic usage over many centuries of oral tradition. Unfortunately there exists for Greek no dictionary which is based on historical principles. But in the absence of such a reference work, an important tool for getting at an historical perspective is Gerhard Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (English translation, 10 vols., Grand Rapids, Mich., 1964-1976). Though Kittel’s monumental reference work is uneven in its word histories and is—as its title makes clear—limited to Greek words which occur in the New Testament, it does contain a synoptic view of thumos and related words from Homer through the New Testament.

A detailed history of the word still remains to be written. It would be a difficult and exacting task, complicated by scholarly controversies both on the lexical level and on the lofty theoretical level of those who have attempted to interpret the development of ‘the Greek mind’. Even the rather sparse discussion in Kittel’s Dictionary indicates that for Homer, for the Greek poets of the archaic period, and for the dramatists of the fifth century, the word thumos has a wide and intricate range of meanings. As can be seen in the entry summarized above from Liddell and Scott’s lexicon, the basic sense of ‘that force which gives motion’ gets extended to particular organs or seats of motion and emotion, as well as to the end results of motion or emotion. Because of the extremely fragmentary nature of the evidence provided by the poets of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., it is difficult to generalize about these extensions, but there are enough examples of thumos in archaic literature to be sure that it remained an important psychological term in accounting for human emotional life. ‘It is my thumos to celebrate you in song’, sings the poet Alcaeus (fr. 143, ed. Page). ‘Thumos, thumos, stirred by unmanageable grief, rise up, thrust your breast to the enemy, ward him off,’ is the beginning of the poet Archilochus’ celebrated internal dialogue with his own thumos (fr. 67, ed. Diehl). In Sappho’s invocation to Aphrodite she prays, ‘do not, Queen, overwhelm my thumos with troubles’ (Sappho 1.4 = fr. 191, Page). There are ample instances of similar usages in the vocabulary of the fifth century tragedians. ‘Other men as well have a sharp thumos’ (Sophocles, Oedipus Coloneus 1193). ‘I may not even cry as
much as my thumos brings me pleasure to do so’ (Sophocles, Electra 286-87); ‘... her thumos thrown into disorder by love’ (Euripides, Medea 8); ‘Listen, child of Inachus, hear and take these words to your thumos’ (Aeschylus, Prometheus 705-06); Electra: ‘Who is this man?’ Orestes: ‘Don’t you know him?’ Electra: ‘I don’t carry him into my thumos at any rate’ (Sophocles, Electra 1346-47). Virtually any emotion, idea, or recognition of which one is aware may be ascribed to the thumos. Indeed, it is chiefly through the action of thumos upon them that people recognize their emotions or thoughts and are enabled to be not only conscious, but self-conscious.

The later development of thumos is characterized by a progressive narrowing of its semantic space. Among the reasons for this narrowing must be included advances in the study of physiology and the emphasis, initiated in the late fifth century B.C. by certain of the sophists and carried on by later philosophers, upon precision of definition and careful differentiation between related terms.

Of particular interest is Plato’s use of thumos in his elaboration of the tripartite soul. In the Republic Socrates distinguishes three parts of the psuche: one is to epithumetikon (‘the appetitive’, Republic 439e); the second is to thumoeides (variously translated as ‘the passionate’ or ‘the spirited’, Republic 440e); and the third is to philosophon (‘the philosophic’, Republic 411e). This division of the psuche is further developed by Aristotle, who distinguishes four aspects and makes thumos (‘spirit’) along with desire a subdivision of the appetitive aspect of the soul (Nicomachean Ethics 1144a9). Later still, the general opposition between thumos and the highest aspects of the soul is maintained by the Stoic Cleanthes who contrasts personified Thumos with Logismos (‘Reason’, Stoica 1.129).

The gradual narrowing of thumos’ semantic range was not limited to the philosophers. Euripides, who still associates thumos with a wide range of feelings, nonetheless opposes it forcefully to reason. Medea, for example, asserts ‘Thumos is more powerful than my reasoned plans, thumos that brings the greatest evils upon mortals’ (Medea, 1079-80). Here the context requires that we take thumos to mean ‘anger’. Thucydides regularly associates thumos with strong feelings of anger or agitation and likewise opposes it to reason: ‘orge (anger) comes over men who see with their own eyes that they are suffering something to which they are unaccustomed and they rush to action consulting logismos least, thumos most’ (2.11). In later authors the tendency to equate thumos with ‘anger’ is confirmed. In the Hellenistic writings of Philo and Josephus and in the New Testament thumos and orge have become fully interchangeable.

It is, of course, thumos in its richly developed usage, in its most intricate semantic space, which fascinates and stimulates the intellect. Though the
tools of lexicography, comparative linguistics, and word history can bring us closer to an understanding of *thumos*, they should not be employed with the hope of pinning down a formulaic set of English equivalents. They should rather help us to appreciate more fully the dynamic fluidity of the term and to grasp its radical 'otherness'—that is to say, how different it is from conceptual modes of explaining human behaviour available in English. This more protean *thumos* has all the more interest just because it has a complicated range of meaning, an intricate history, and a way of eluding definition in modern terms. In its complexity *thumos* somehow seems to bridge so many of the dualities that plague modern thought: 'mind and body', 'reason and emotion', 'the intellectual and the sensual', contraries all, philosophical antinomies in need of a *tertium quid*. It is for this reason that *thumos* has become an appropriate subject for modern philosophical reflection and meditation. We might instance two influential works in particular, Paul Tillich's *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, 1952) and Paul Ricoeur's *Fallible Man* (English translation, Chicago, 1965), both works in which more undifferentiated, 'archaic' modes of thinking are employed to provide philosophical solutions to modern dilemmas. Even for those who have a more sophisticated and analytical vocabulary at their disposal, perhaps especially for those, *thumos* can still prove to be undifferentiated energy, that which moves and therefore gives life.