

Friendship and Divine Justice in Homer's *Iliad*

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Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, and Xenophon all gratefully acknowledge that Homer was the authoritative teacher of the Greeks, the poet responsible for the common moral understanding of the people who came to be called "Hellenes."¹ They also point us to Homer's conscious attempt to establish for his readers the equation of the good with the ancestral, and thus the rule of ancestral gods.² Homer achieved these ends in part through his story of Achilles. His account of the expedition against Troy in the *Iliad* is, as even its opening lines make clear, a song about the anger of Achilles, leader of the first "Hellenes."³ It has been aptly called the tragedy of Achilles.⁴ Without Achilles, there is no *Iliad*. When he is absent from the fighting, the Greeks are weak, and without the sacrifice of his life in the Greek cause, Achilles finally learns or moves to believe, his life is nothing. By giving the Greeks of his own day his poem about Achilles, about his thoughts and deeds, Homer gave them their common moral understanding, and allowed his readers to take for themselves the name of the people led by Achilles.⁵

It has for some time now been fashionable to approach Homer not as the educator of the Greeks, but as the embodiment or product of his particular "oral" culture. According to the view underlying this approach, if a single poet named Homer lived at all, he was in the most important respects the valet of the moral understanding of his time and of his listening audience. To understand him, we need better to understand parallel oral cultures and social contexts, "such as the Ndembu of Zambia . . . and the Yukuna of the Colombian Amazon," and the discourse and performance patterns that we find there.⁶ Whatever the merits of this view, it tends to overlook an important fact about Homer's *Iliad*. While many of the particular details of the poem are no longer immediately recognizable or charming to us as they were to the ancients,

Greeks, the education Homer provided those Greeks was achieved through the presentation and resolution of a recognizably permanent human problem, one that transcends the dichotomy between written and oral culture that has recently preoccupied professional students of Homer.

The problem confronting Achilles, Agamemnon, and all the Greeks is the genuine superiority of Achilles to Agamemnon and his consequent revolt from Agamemnon's rule. The problem is deepened by the fact that, as the so-called delivery of the scepter shows us, Agamemnon inherited his rule from a line extending directly back to Zeus.⁷ Achilles revolts against a divinely appointed ruler, and when he does so, none of the other heroes dares to punish him for it. (Odysseus, by contrast, is moved to beat the braggart Thersites, "the basest man who came beneath Ilion," after he apes Achilles' revolt against Agamemnon's rule 2.211–77). Even in his famous catalogue of ships, which is intended to manifest the respective greatness of the ancient Greek leaders and, it seems, especially, of Agamemnon (2.569–580 with 761–784), Homer reflects the problem. He there names the leaders who sailed and the numbers of their respective ships, and while Agamemnon is said to have had by far the greatest number of ships, the smallest number were under Nireus, "the noblest man to come beneath Ilion beyond the other Danaans, next after [Achilles] the blameless son of Peleus" (2.673–75; cf. II 20). But Homer likewise presents therein the promise of an eventual resolution of the problem: "For [Briseis'] sake Achilles lay grieving now, but was soon to rise up" (2.694). Achilles finally learns or decides that deference is due to Agamemnon, however just he once believed his grievance against the divinely appointed king to be. The quarrel between the two leaders is eventually resolved, as are Achilles' doubts about divine justice, which the quarrel brings to light.

We are moved by this problem confronting Achilles, and moved to reflect on the problem, because it is not peculiar to him or to his time, but is permanent. It is hard to imagine a human being who has not experienced some form of injustice at the hands of superiors. And however different our culture may be from that of Achilles, we are still able to see that his prolonged withdrawal from the common Greek effort against Troy is not due to a mindless or petty anger on his part. On the contrary, we can still recognize that when Agamemnon's faithful followers first approach Achilles in the hope of attaining a reconciliation, they are stymied because Achilles' questioning of Agamemnon's worthiness to rule has in the meantime deepened into a questioning of justice, and thence to a questioning of the rule of Zeus (9.307 ff.). We

can still see that Homer presents Achilles, in what some readers will find his greatest moments, as having experienced grave doubts about the life of virtue led in pursuit of the eternal, divinely bestowed glory to which he had dedicated himself, and hence about the very existence of a just god. Finally, the resolution of his quarrel with Agamemnon depends on the resolution of Achilles' doubts, and we may come to suspect that these doubts are not necessarily resolved in a manner meant to satisfy Homer's most thoughtful and attentive readers. Far from being merely the valet of the moral understanding of his own time, then, Homer presents through Achilles an heroic struggle with the very foundation of justice and the moral life, a struggle that remains visible and gripping because the human forces moving it are timeless.⁸

Not only is the problem with which Achilles wrestled still visible to us. It may well have been explored by Homer in a manner that modern (and allegedly postmodern) political thought tends to keep us from understanding. In fact, insofar as Achilles' struggle is not familiar to us because it appears foreign and strange, we may need Homer's poetry now more than ever. The deficiency in understanding may well belong to our age rather than to Homer's poem. Living in regimes that attempt to secure "rights" rather than to cultivate our sense of honor and duty to others, we risk losing sight of the hardship, pain, and sacrifice that a life of moral virtue demands. Respecting the rights of others, we go along in order to get along; we live and let live; we are tolerant. But toleration is a moral principle (rather than something we are resigned to in practice) that demands a certain indifference to vice and virtue, and tends to make us as easily content with ourselves as with others. Advertisements that tell us about the break we deserve today or the furniture that we owe ourselves begin to sound quite reasonable. It becomes easy to believe ourselves equally worthy of esteem and recognition, and in our unproblematic comfort we run the risk of becoming what Nietzsche identified as "Last Men." That risk is increased by the present dominance of postmodernism in the American academy. Richard Rorty, a leader of American postmodernism, summed up its moral-political project bluntly at a recent political science convention: "We [postmodernist liberals] want you to be wishy-washy. We want you to have a moral backbone, but we want it to be as thin and as flexible as possible."⁹

By thus attempting to keep from our lives the distinctly human experiences of serious devotion to the noble and to the divine, modern political and intellectual life may hide us from ourselves, and so hide the world's disclosure of itself from us. Encouraged to pursue low-grade versions of justice and nobility, we may be ever less able to see our restless

longings for what they are. And this may in turn make us ever less able to shed the delusions that sustain the inadequate, dehumanizing answers to our longings offered by modern life and modern thought. As for postmodernists, who seek to wrest themselves free of modernity, rarely do they undertake the kind of investigation of the moral life that has been undertaken by Homer.¹⁰ But since they are fond of declaring the final victory of poetry over philosophy, of particular or local "stories" over rational investigations that aim to uncover the truth about our world, postmodernists may be less inclined to scold us if we seek some insight from the poet-educator of the Greeks than if we were to seek it from Greek philosophers.¹¹

The Problem of Achilles

What, then, is the basis of Achilles' doubts, and how are they resolved?¹² What is the core of the moral and religious education that Homer provided for the Greeks, and still provides for us?

When we first meet him, Achilles is angered by Agamemnon's demand for Briseis, a demand that he considers to be only the latest example of the unjust distribution of honors among the Greeks (1.148–71). He vows to leave the fighting, and swears an oath by Zeus that Agamemnon will regret having dishonored him (1.233–44, 338–42). Later, he prays to his divine mother, Thetis, that Zeus, who has allowed him to be dishonored, might vindicate his oath (1.351–56, 407–12). Zeus appears to have answered Achilles' prayer. In Achilles' absence from the fighting, the Greeks are brought to their knees, and Agamemnon, regretting what he has done, finally sends his men to Achilles with the promise of honoring him like a god (9.115–18, 300–303, 602–4). This much is clear to every reader of the *Iliad*.

Less clear are the reasons for Achilles' rejection of Agamemnon's generous offer of reconciliation. The Greek leaders who have brought the offer to Achilles consider him headstrong or savagely angry (9.628–30, 697–99). And we might at first be inclined to agree. Yet while he does at times show anger, anger that can be placated, as he claims, by nothing Agamemnon has offered or could ever offer him (9.369–87), Achilles appears to be torn between this anger and altogether different sentiments. When the Greek leaders first arrive, for example, he appears musical, friendly, pleased and pleasing, and in general capable of more than harshness or anger. Later, he tells them—amazingly—that he wishes Agamemnon happiness with Briseis, and appears in general to

show some indifference to Agamemnon's joy or grief (9.336–39). Most notably, Achilles is no longer so concerned about his honor, and is even considering returning home to lead a long, comfortable private life rather than a short, glorious one (9.314 ff, 410 ff). Achilles' anger is not simply bestial. He appears rather to be perplexed or confused, and therefore angry.

Homer shows us what lies behind Achilles' confusion or perplexity most vividly when he presents Achilles reflecting, apparently for the first time, on the life of heroic virtue that he has led hitherto. Achilles' experience has led him to conclude, first, that there is no gratitude (*charis*) for those who fight endlessly against enemies; and second, that since all men, virtuous and base, receive equal rewards and come in the end to the same equal fate—death—nothing, including glory, is more important than a man's own life (9.314–24, 408–15). This reflection represents a stark about-face for Achilles. Previously, he viewed the brevity of his own life as grounds for expecting Zeus to honor him, as compensation for its brevity (1.352–56). He has now been driven, through Agamemnon's dishonoring of him, to doubt whether Zeus honors or favors him at all, or for that matter, whether Zeus can be said to honor or favor any mortal.¹³ Zeus, after all, like the Greek leaders, had kept silent when Achilles was dishonored (9.308–13), and it may only be because Thetis was calling in a previous debt that Zeus gave any attention at all to Achilles' plight (1.396–412, 15.599). To accept Agamemnon's offer would also be to accept once again what the wealthy Agamemnon wishes to bring about (9.157, 375–76). The only thing that could resolve Achilles' perplexity, it seems, is an apparent impossibility: the complete *undoing* of Agamemnon's outrage, the undoing of that experience that has led Achilles to the haunting thought that virtuous men suffer in the end the same fate as other men. Only if everything that has happened at Agamemnon's hands can be shown to have been done by Zeus wholly for the sake of honoring Achilles can this be accomplished (15.599). Doubting that this is so, Achilles is inclined to abandon the life dedicated to the pursuit of glory, of glory obtained by sacrifice of his own good for the good of others (9.320–29). That life, the life of virtue, looks now like a long, mistaken attempt to secure himself against death by sacrificing life and life's enjoyments.

To be sure, Achilles is led to soften his stance somewhat when an appeal is made to him by Aias on the grounds of friendship (9.630 ff with 654–55), and this appeal serves to prepare us for the complex resolution of Achilles' doubts: at the request of Nestor, Achilles' friend Patroclus later persuades Achilles to allow him to enter the fighting in

Achilles' armor (11.792–96, 16.36 ff), and Patroclus's subsequent death at Hector's hands brings Achilles himself back into the fighting. The question, to repeat, is whether Homer presents this resolution of Achilles' perplexing doubts as satisfactory.

Patroclus's Death and the Return of Achilles

We learn in Book 15 (74–77) that Zeus will completely accomplish what Thetis had asked of him. He will completely honor Achilles, and will thereby restore Achilles' faith in Zeus's governance of the world, dispelling his doubts about the heroic life. But this is to be achieved through the creation and resolution of a new difficulty. As we have seen, Achilles' doubts about the life of virtue and the divine support for virtue for a time overwhelmed all other things for him, including the pleas of friends. But once such doubts have been dispelled, as they are for Achilles in Book 16, two fundamental human concerns emerge: virtue and friendship. At this point the best of the Greeks have almost all been wounded in battle, and while Achilles is at first delighted by this, his friend Patroclus (who pities the Greeks) both reprimands and supplicates Achilles, in the manner Nestor had requested (16.56–59, 85–86). Achilles is moved by his friend's words to put his anger behind him, though he does not yet return to the battle. Instead, he grants Patroclus's secondary request that he at least be permitted to fight in Achilles' armor. And Achilles justifies his own inaction by citing the promise, which he made to Aias or Agamemnon, that he himself would return to the fighting only when the Trojans attacked his own ships (16.52–63; cf. 9.646–655). As the context reminds us, that promise had been made as part of Achilles' abiding desire that Agamemnon see that he, and he alone, is absolutely indispensable to the Greeks, and worthy of the greatest honor (cf. 16.242–45). As his subsequent prayers to Zeus show, Achilles now feels bound to keep such promises because his doubts about Zeus's just governance of the world have been resolved, for he is satisfied that he is indeed being honored by Zeus (16.97–99, 235–49). His own restored belief in divine support for his virtue is, then, what dictates that he keep his own word, and hence, that Patroclus must for now go out into battle in his place.

But perhaps helping one's friends is more important than keeping one's word. Could friendship be at odds with the concern for virtue (15.282)? Achilles is for his part confident, at this point, that there is no necessary tension between the two. While he warns Patroclus not to at-

tempt to diminish his own glory by leading the fight against Troy itself, he then prays that the gods will honor the two of them alone together (9.97–100), and later, that Zeus grant Patroclus his share of glory and a safe return with his companions (236–48).

Zeus, however, honors only the first of these prayers (15.250), and when Achilles learns of the death of his dear friend Patroclus at Hector's hands, he comes to see that he was, indeed, somehow wrong all along, that he had until now been deficient in counsel (18.125). It seems that Achilles now recognizes that his two fundamental concerns, his need for friendship and his concern for virtue, are not simply compatible. For there is, as his divine mother suggests, nothing incompatible between Patroclus's death and the fulfillment of Achilles' initial prayer or desire. The former is in fact part and parcel of the latter (18.74–77; cf. 8.470–76 and 15.61–68). Hence with the death of Patroclus, Achilles realizes that the honor he has been demanding as his just desert is at odds with his friendship with Patroclus, a man whom he loved even as himself (18.81–82). He now sees that virtue, and its divine support, were never his *sole* concern. And with this he is able to see in turn that what he has done is wrong, that he was mistaken to insist on his own just honor. He therefore concludes that he is responsible for what has happened, and that he *deserves* death for not having stood by his friend and prevented his death. Avenging the death of Patroclus will, as he senses and his mother confirms, bring about his own death. But he now accepts this death as something he deserves for not having aided his dear friend as he could have (18.90–100; cf. 19.203–13; 21.128–35).

It is in this way that Achilles' doubts about Zeus are resolved, and his own inevitable death accepted. As he now sees it, Patroclus's death resulted from Achilles' own inaction, not from Zeus, who after all has not only granted his request but done so in such a way that Achilles comes to know his own needs better. Besides, the fighting to which he is now going will unite his two fundamental concerns—he will win glory on account of his virtue and he will avenge the death of his friend, and indeed of all the fallen Achaeans. He therefore *longs* to fight, even if it is sure to bring about his own death (18.114–21). Seeing now that the whole quarrel with Agamemnon was a mistake on his part, Achilles realizes that he cannot blame everything on “Zeus” or on an unkind world. He will never again question Zeus's action. As he indicates late in a prayer to Zeus (19.270–75), his heart's quarrel with Agamemnon was a “delusion.” And while the delusion would not have occurred without Zeus himself, Achilles finds that it and its sad consequences were “somehow,” mysteriously, Zeus's wish. Even if Zeus's governance still appears

to be bad or wrong, Zeus is not to be blamed. If things turn out badly for those who are just or virtuous, they must accept responsibility themselves. Achilles now begins to see, in other words, that the gods cannot answer all our prayers or wishes, particularly our deepest wish, the wish to obtain, eventually, an existence without sorrows (18.107–10, 19.67–68; 1.106–13). To ask to be without sorrows, including above all the sorrow of death and our sorrowful knowledge of it, is to ask to be no longer human; only the immortal gods are without sorrows (24.525–26, 550–51).

The Problem of Achilles' Nobility

If Achilles' doubts about Zeus's governance of the world are resolved to his satisfaction, they are resolved in a way that is sure to make those doubts more acute for Homer's attentive readers. For while the lesson Achilles learns about the impossibility of a sorrowless human life appears to be sound, we cannot say that the ground upon which he comes to accept this lesson—that he deserves death for not having stood by his friend—has been shown to be true. Rather, we are compelled to say that Achilles now merely *assumes* it to be true, for nothing in the intervening sections of the poem suggests that it is true. Those sections, as well as the final resolution of Achilles' doubts, suggest the contrary, by indicating the contradictory nature of the life of virtue to which Achilles has returned. Achilles' disinclination to help his friends when his doubts about the life of virtue were strong indicates that virtue is the very *ground* of friendship. So, too, his subsequent belief that he deserved death for not having stood by his friend indicates that friendship itself required that he act virtuously. But if virtue is the ground of friendship, and virtue and friendship are not simply compatible, then the life of virtue is at odds with *itself*, or one aspect of virtue is in conflict with another. It would appear then that not human life *per se*, but the virtuous life, is at odds with itself, and so leading that life will be the source, as Achilles had earlier suspected, of many unnecessary sorrows.

Homer presents this contradictory character of heroic virtue perhaps most strikingly in Achilles' exchanges with his friend Patroclus. Shortly after his meeting with the Greek leaders, Achilles suggests to Patroclus that the Greeks should do something to placate him: supplicate him like a god (11.606–9), which would deprive every other Greek of any remotely comparable honor. Patroclus is for his part silent at this point, but what he tells Nestor shortly thereafter about Achilles makes clear his

disapproval of Achilles' disposition (11.648–53; 11.815 ff.). Moreover, when Patroclus, on an errand for Achilles, learns that the best Greek leaders have all been wounded in battle, he is moved by pity to attend to their needs rather than returning immediately to Achilles, despite his fear of incurring his wrath (11.836–40; cf. 646–51). Patroclus appears to be much more humane and sensible than Achilles, but Homer suggests that he fails to see something about the life of heroic virtue that Achilles has seen.

When Patroclus returns to Achilles, weeping for the injured Greeks he has been nursing, Achilles indicates that he for his part is delighted by the thought that the Greeks are getting what they deserve for not having granted him honor above all others. Patroclus is appalled by this, and finally tells as much to Achilles, placing himself emphatically among the Achaeans whom Achilles contemns (16.2–35). The growing possibility of a rift between the two, one that Achilles appears not to have previously considered, is averted at this point only by Patroclus's request to go into battle in Achilles' place. This in turn has the effect, however, of bringing the whole problem facing Achilles to the surface again. For having granted Patroclus' request, he must now warn Patroclus, as we saw, not to diminish Achilles' own glory (16.84–90). We realize now that while Achilles had, in his feud with Agamemnon, wanted Zeus to take only virtue into account, so that he would be honored as he deserves, he cannot help but realize that it is *his* virtue, or *his* just honor from his virtuous deeds, rather than the honoring of any and all virtuous men, that really concerns him—although his complaint against all the other Greeks and especially Agamemnon had been that they care about some things other than or in addition to virtue. That Achilles' warning to Patroclus is followed by the prayer that he and Patroclus alone should win glory *together* by taking Troy only serves to highlight Achilles' difficulties. It shows Achilles' willingness to see all of the other Greeks die along with the Trojans.

While Homer at this point causes the friends' conversation to be abruptly broken off,¹⁴ we can see that, had it continued, Achilles would likely have been brought back, by Patroclus's objections on behalf of the other Greeks, to his former doubts about the life of virtue. We know that Patroclus does not share the desire Achilles expresses in this prayer; he feels obligated to aid his fellow Greeks. Moreover, if Achilles would exclude these other Greeks from a share of his glory, because of his desire to obtain a justly deserved glory for himself and Patroclus alone, why should he desire to share his honor with Patroclus? Any obligations he feels to Patroclus are, after all, no different in kind from those that Pa-

troelos feels for his friends, and so are at odds with the glory Achilles believes himself to deserve and knows himself to want.

We are led to conclude that the warning to Patrolos not to diminish Achilles' own glory is the true necessary consequence of Achilles' desire for his own deserts, and hence that he is necessarily led by his very concern for justice to contradict himself. For even if Achilles were to obtain the honor for which he longs by the kind of worthy service to others that Patrolos wishes to pursue, he would thereby deprive the others of their honor, just as their honor would diminish his. He would be unjust rather than just. His willingness to see all the other Greeks die is the extreme or "heroic" manifestation of this permanent problem. Achilles' concern with the glorious recognition of his virtue, with obtaining what he considers a very great good for his beneficent service to his friends, is incompatible with his friends obtaining that good. If on the other hand his friends obtain other, *better* things from his service while he obtains honor, why then should he strive for honor? Why not return home and enjoy the good things that he now provides others, rather than depriving himself of those things? Achilles has, it seems, been impossibly attempting to obtain his own greatest good by being worthy of it through the greatest benefactions to others rather than to himself.

Achilles, as we have seen, never comes again to doubt virtue on the basis of this impossibility or contradiction. Seeing flames engulf the ships by which, as he says, he plans to return home (16.126–29)—that is, hoping at this moment *both* to win glory from Zeus *and* return home, or fleeing now all thoughts of his own death—he is eventually led, through his abiding sense of obligation to Patrolos, to return to the life of providing good things to others. By being a friend, by being virtuous, he loses his own life. He comes to see and to accept the insufficiency of the heroically virtuous life to provide happiness, but he cannot allow himself to see and accept that this is due to the contradictory character of the heroically virtuous life itself. Instead, his anger and his grief for his friend's loss, which may in truth be a grief for himself and his own impending death (cf. 19.301–2, 338–39), cause him to need all the more a just, if mysterious, Zeus.¹⁵

The unsatisfactory character of Achilles' resolution of his doubts is also reflected in Homer's presentation of the counsels of the Olympian gods, who are shown to be unable to consistently support virtue. For shortly after Zeus discloses his full plan to accomplish what Thetis had begged him for, to completely honor Achilles (15.74–77), Athena points out to Ares the unreasonableness of caring for one's own at the expense of many good men (15.135–41). And the honoring of Achilles above all

other men, which Thetis wants and Zeus will accomplish, means that some who deserve honor will not receive it. But this, of course, was the basis of Achilles' complaint against Agamemnon and against Zeus. He had wanted Zeus to honor him above all others, but he had demanded that the honor be from a *just* Zeus, a Zeus who has no favorites in distributing honors. This Zeus cannot be. Hector, for example, must be made by Zeus to defeat good men who deserve glory in order to win greater glory, and Hector is given glory in turn only to increase the glory of Achilles (15.593–99, 610–14, 637–44). Similarly, when Zeus punishes injustice, innocents as well as the guilty are punished (15.137; cf. 16.384–93, 259–65). The battles through which he grants men honor are also where men die, leaving widows, orphans, helpless parents, and forsaken women who longed to be lawful brides.¹⁶ If Zeus can punish injustices, it seems he cannot prevent them. Particular injustices are rectified only by other injustices, and, hence, those (like Zeus) committing the injustices are not to be blamed. They are compelled by justice to commit them, compelled to harm some innocent in their defense of the innocent, or more generally, to deprive some human beings of what they deserve when meting out just deserts to others. Zeus and the other gods cannot reward virtue adequately, and when Zeus honors Achilles in accordance with Achilles' own desire for justice, he acts unjustly in precisely the way that Agamemnon had been unjust in not honoring Achilles.¹⁷

Conclusion

Homer, we conclude, leads his thoughtful readers to see that Achilles' anger and his deep grief for the loss of his friend drove him to assume, erroneously, that Zeus supports the virtue that is the basis of friendship. So it comes as no surprise to find that Homer also casts doubt on the adequacy of Achilles' understanding of death, which Achilles claims finally to have accepted. When Achilles initially comes to make that claim, for example, he states that even Heracles, the dear son of Zeus, died (18.117–21), indicating that his own resignation to death is mingled with a hope for some divine redemption. There are, to be sure, passages that suggest a resignation to death as an inevitable annihilation, one that no amount of virtuous deeds can prevent. For example, when Lycaon, one of Priam's sons, supplicates him for mercy, Achilles replies with the most beautiful lines:

No, friend, you also die; why do you lament this?
Patrolos died too, who was far better than you.

And do you not see what a man I am, how beautiful, how great?
 My father was a good man, a goddess the mother that bore me;
 yet even over me loom death and mighty destiny.
 There will come a dawn or evening or mid-day,
 when in Battle someone shall also take the spirit from me,
 whether it be with a cast of the spear, or an arrow from the string.
 (21.106–13)

Achilles appears here to be, at last, fully resigned to his death. Yet the harsh fury that grips him after he has spoken about death in this way (21.122–35) indicates an incapacity to accept his own words. Moreover, while Achilles here appears to foresee his own death not abstractly but quite concretely—stating specific possible times and weapons—he considers only the possibility of a glorious death on the battlefield. And his subsequent dread that he will drown ingloriously in an overflowing river (21.184–91, 273–83) confirms that for Achilles, death must be a *noble* death. This seems to be due to his abiding hope that such a death will earn him, especially as a descendant of Zeus, some immortality.¹⁸

The incapacity of Achilles may also help us to understand why Homer casts doubt even on the wisdom of Achilles' belief that the gods are immortal and without sorrows.¹⁹ In fact, Homer suggests that it is merely the supposition of divine actions, rather than any actual divine actions, that moves men like Achilles in their noble, glorious deeds.²⁰ He suggests that the desire for justice and the immortality that it promises ever prompts his heroes to see a deeper or more mysterious cause behind or below the surface of things, obstructing their access to the world as it genuinely is by obstructing its natural articulation to them.²¹ This may be the greatest difference between Homer and his heroes. In any event, it eventually became the task of political philosophy, the alternative to Homeric poetry, to resolve Achilles' perplexities about friendship and the virtuous life in a more satisfying manner—in a manner that established the soundness of the life of reason and hence of the genuinely virtuous life and of genuine, delusionless friendship.

Notes

1. See Herodotus, II 53; Thucydides 1.2–10; Plato, *Minos* 319b–321c, *Republic* 606e1–5, *Ion* 530b, 531c–d; Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.5. Aristotle, who attributes logographic necessity to Homer's works (*Poetics* 1451a15–36), ranks Homer with Empedocles (*De Anima*, 427a25). On Homer's intimations or private thoughts versus his more public teaching, consider Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.6, *Memorabilia*

I.2.58–61, and Plato, *Republic* 378d6–8. See also the remarkable article by David Bolotin, "The Concerns of Odysseus: An Introduction to Homer's *Odyssey*," *Interpretation* 17. no.1 (fall 1989).

2. To show forth the tremendous bodily strength of the ancients, many of whom can trace their ancestry to gods or demigods, Homer sometimes makes comparisons of his champions with his contemporaries, claiming that the champions could lift things that no single man can lift "such as men are now" (e.g. 1.265–72; 5.303–4; 12.383, 445–49). He thereby invites his readers to compare the story they are reading with what is in front of them or what they can see with their own eyes. But such formulations in fact defy any genuine comparison with the present, and hence defy refutation. They are elusive. The rock Homer speaks of, and the champion lifting it, would always grow bigger because Homer's formulation makes them vary with the size of his listeners. Likewise, Homer's "catalogue of ships" is intended to show forth the greatness of the ancients, and is prefaced by his most explicit claim to be in need of divine assistance in order to know what took place in the ancient past (2.474–94, 580; contrast the preface to the catalogue of Trojans, 2.811–15, and see 18.518–19). The greatness of the most ancient past deeds of human beings is a reflection of their proximity to the gods, to whom Homer also appears to defer.

3. *Iliad* 2.684. See *Panhellenes* at 2.530, and see Thucydides 1.2

4. Richmond Lattimore, "Introduction," *The Iliad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951, 1967), 17.

5. Consider also Homer's use of *Panhellenes* at 2.530, in the Catalogue of Ships, and his bestowing on Achilles at 19.386 the title "shepherd of the people," Agamemnon's former title (2.772). See W. W. How and J. Wells, *A Commentary on Herodotus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912). I, 76.

6. Gregory Nagy, *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), vii.

7. Descent of the aegis from Zeus the king is Agamemnon's awesome and illustrious title to rule. Agamemnon wields the aegis, which Zeus and Hephaistos "make" for Pelops and which then passed directly down to Atreus, to Thyestes, and then to Thyestes' brother among mortals (1.277–81, 95–109, 186–97, 445–55; 6.159; 23.890–94).

8. For reasons that should become apparent in what follows, I find inadequate the understanding of Homeric poetry that limits his or his heroes' understanding of the moral life to a conviction about what is "honorable," and denies to him and to his heroes a concern for justice understood as devotion to the common good. On the understanding in question, see M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: Viking [1954] 1965), 19–20, 121–32; A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), 36, 60; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

9. Richard Rorty, "Response to Sandel," American Political Science Association Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois, 1 September 1995.

10. On this failure of the postmodernists, see Thomas L. Pangle's *The Ennobling of Democracy: The Challenge of the Postmodern Age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), especially the highly illuminating discussion of Jean-Francois Lyotard in chapter two.

11. See for example Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 25, 40.

12. I am indebted for what follows to Christopher Bruell, who taught a course on Homer's Iliad at Boston College in 1976, and to David Bolotin's "The Concerns of Odysseus," *Interpretation* 17, no.1 (fall 1989).

13. At 9.608, Achilles claims again that he is already sufficiently honored by Zeus, yet he becomes enraged yet again at 9.646–48 when he recalls Agamemnon's dishonoring of him.

14. 16.101–24. Homer, to put it crudely, has his Muse yell "fire!"

15. In this sense, Socrates is indeed the new Achilles that he almost claims to be in Plato's *Apology*. He lives a long, private, examined life rather than coming to the aid of the just things, as a good man ought, and holding this to be most important. See *Apology* 28c2–d5 with 31d9–10, 32e2–6, and 37e2–38a8. Cf. *Republic* 620c3–9.

16. 2.830–33; 11.329–31; 19.298.

17. This is not to say that Homer thinks human beings would be better off without any belief in Zeus. We note in particular that while the gods themselves wreak havoc in the farmlands in Homer's account of the battles at Troy (21.346–48, 404–8), even in war human beings are far more vicious when left to themselves. In the gods' absence (6.1, 311) there is little more than necessity (6.85, 458; 8.58) and the justice of the limitless vengeance of the stronger (6.12–62, 98–99). On this aspect of the *Iliad*, see Seth Benardete, "The Aristeia of Diomedes and the Plot of the Iliad" (AGON, 10–27), which, however, seems to grant too much to the heroes in attributing to them a genuine awareness of death. See, e.g., *Iliad* 12.310–28 with 5.672–75 and 696–98 (Sarpedon, being Zeus's son, may consider that he therefore will always be so brought back to life after death); see 13.414 with 20.61–68 (Aidoneus's horror at what men and gods might be able to see clearly). Achilles, in particular, was wrong about death when he accepted it, as we learn in the *Odyssey* (11.488–91).

18. See also 16.433 ff., where Zeus contemplates immortality for his son Sarpedon. Achilles persuades the grieving Priam to eat by means of the example of Niobe (24.601–20; contrast Odysseus's sensible words to Achilles on the same subject, 19.155–82, 223–33). Achilles' abiding hope for life also manifests itself, of course, in his dream of Patroclus's dead soul (23.65–107). Homer himself causes us to doubt the wisdom of speaking to a dead man (16.858).

19. The gods' immortality is called into question throughout book 5: 337–38 (cf. 311), 402, 855–62, 886–87, 895–902.

20. For example, at 11.313 ff., although Zeus is supposed to be directing the battle, the Greeks would have been utterly routed had not Odysseus and Diomedes made a stand, which they make precisely because they believe Zeus to be

not yet involved in the battle (contrast 8.92–97). Hector manages to encourage the Trojans at 13.150–54 by speaking of Zeus' support for his actions, but Zeus isn't even paying attention (13.4–9). At 15.377–80, the prayer of Nestor is answered by Zeus's thunder, which, however, encourages the Trojans for battle. At 22.5, Destiny is said to hold Hector; at 105, shame.

21. So, Rabbi Hayim Halevi Donin calls the capture of East Jerusalem in the 1967 war by the skilled and powerfully equipped Israeli army an event "reflecting unexpected miraculous elements." *To Be a Jew* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), 267; cf. 16.

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