

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHANCE IN THE *ILIAD**

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Jean-Pierre Vernant (1990a, 1990b, 1990c) argues in a series of essays that the tragic sense of responsibility that develops in fifth-century Athenian drama arises at a point at which individuals are developing sufficient autonomy to begin making choices for which they are responsible, but are still tied to an inscrutable divine order that binds, even traps, individuals by their decisions. In the case of epic, Vernant continues, there is no action since “man is never envisaged as an agent” (1990c.44), that is, as “a responsible and autonomous subject who manifests himself in and through actions that are imputable to him” (1990b.50).

Vernant, in making this argument, draws on a formula that is Kantian in its modern expression but has served to define the terms of the debate about the nature of agency in the Homeric epic. Stated in its most general form, agency rests upon a particular conception of the will, one that is free from such external controls as contingency or luck. Given a more ethical cast, agency requires the existence of morally autonomous individuals guided by their own rationally determined and freely chosen values. Only with such autonomy of the will can there be the responsible subject to which Vernant refers.¹

Though variously conceived in Homeric scholarship, this tradeoff between agency and contingency has received its most prominent expression

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1 See B. Williams 1981 and 1993.chap. 1–2. See also M. C. Nussbaum 1986.chap. 1.

in the juxtaposition of the human and divine world. Simply stated, the gods in the Homeric epics, the *Iliad* in particular, are everywhere. They watch, take sides, devise plans, appear in dreams, provide counsel, interfere in the physical universe, and even engage in fighting. In short, the gods act and appear as forces originating outside the human will: as chance, or contingency, or luck. We can see the problem immediately: agency in the Homeric world can be purchased only by a corresponding diminution in the role of the gods.

It is the purpose of this article to challenge the nature of this tradeoff by way of a rather unconventional route: namely, by rethinking the almost axiomatic conception of chance as having an essentially objective and universal existence. We can understand chance definitionally as an unanticipated occurrence, but that does not take us very far. For that does not help us understand why, from the myriad unanticipated events that occur each day, we single out for attention some, but not others. My suggestion is that we can better understand chance as a cultural construction. Which events we pay attention to and the meaning we assign to these occurrences are determined by the culture in which we live. What ties chance to culture is a notion of risk: cultures, as they consist of shared beliefs and values, provide biases about what is dangerous, in general, and what is threatening about chance, in particular.

In the warrior culture of the Homeric world,² chance is perceived as having its most pronounced effect, and elicits the greatest reaction, when it disrupts the status hierarchy. Viewing chance as culturally constituted will allow us to identify a pattern of response of Homeric characters to the unpredictable, seemingly incoherent actions of the gods. Simply stated, the warriors respond to chance by seeking to maintain (or, if need be, restore) their status in the community. Chance, thus, reveals both issues of community maintenance and the nature of human agency, as individuals, through their deliberative and willful actions, seek to maintain a cultural equilibrium. This leads to a more integrated conception of human action:

2 Though it is not essential for this argument, I find the evidence quite persuasive that we can conceive of the *Iliad* as containing a functioning social system. See M. I. Finley 1979, W. Donlan 1980, W. Donlan 1985, W. Donlan 1989a, W. Donlan 1989b, W. Donlan 1997, W. Donlan and C. Thomas 1993, Raaflaub 1997, Raaflaub 1998, and H. Van Wees 1992. This article makes a further case for that notion by suggesting that there is a coherent depiction of chance in the *Iliad*.

not one in which agency exists apart from chance, but one in which chance has both a cultural foundation and, somewhat ironically, is integral to, and integrated into, a conception of human action. Agency and chance, thus, do not exist apart but, as they are mediated through culture, serve to define each other.

GODS OR MEN: THE SCHOLARLY CONSTRUCTION OF HUMAN AGENCY

Though it is impossible to do justice to the nuances of different arguments, we will not be overstating the case to point to a guiding assumption of Homeric scholars that a tradeoff exists between human agency and divine intervention. On the one end are those, like Vernant, who reject the possibility of agency precisely because of the prominent role of the gods. Bruno Snell (1953.29), in his Hegelian reading of the emergence of the Greek conception of the self, notes that, "In Homer every new turn of events is engineered by the gods." The result is that "human initiative has no source of its own; whatever is planned and executed is the plan and deed of the gods" (Snell 1953.30). Indeed, what Homeric man is missing for Snell (1953.31) is consciousness: a realization "that decisions of the will, or any impulses or emotions, have their origin in man himself." Snell (1953.31–32) does argue that the Homeric epics differ from "primitive" views in that Homeric man is not completely bound by the gods but is elevated by them; they make "him free, strong, courageous, certain of himself." But this is not enough to elevate Homeric man to the freedom of human agency; it is only enough to see in Homer the seeds of human freedom that "founded our western civilization" (Snell 1953.32).

Similarly for E. R. Dodds (1957.15), Homeric characters lack any unified concept of the "soul" or "personality." Absent this innerness, "all departures from normal human behaviour whose causes are not immediately perceived, whether by the subjects' own consciousness or by the observation of others, are ascribed to a supernatural agency, just as is any departure from the normal behaviour of the weather or the normal behaviour of a bowstring" (Dodds 1957.13). In one revealing passage, Dodds (1957.13) articulates what has served so often to confound Homeric scholars: why did "a people so civilised, clearheaded, and rational as the Ionians" not eliminate "this sense of constant daily dependence on the supernatural?" Answering this question took Dodds into the field of anthropology and the application of the now well-known distinction

between shame and guilt cultures. In the shame culture of Homeric society, situations that caused public contempt or ridicule would be “projected” to divine agency (Dodds 1957.18).

On the other end of the Homeric spectrum are those who see in the epic the operation of human agents. This is done, though, only by drastically curtailing the role of the gods. Thus, John Gunnell (1987.77–78) argues that, in reformulating various myths and legends, Homer carefully limits the powers of the gods to provide a new focus on human action. Adkins (1960.22), too, separates statements of destiny from the human experience of action: situations covered by Zeus’ prophecy and these same situations that arise from human action are “events” that are “simply described on two levels which do not intersect.” Even at those critical moments in which an event is ascribed specifically to divine action, “the characters still act ‘of their own free will,’ for the incompatibility of the two statements does not occur to the poet. Common-sense carelessness again preserves individual responsibility” (Adkins 1960.23). A thoughtful Kantian Homer was not.

In between these two views stands the bulk of Homeric scholarship that seeks to find some balance between the human and divine world. In reconciling human agency with divine intervention, the result is often a series of paradoxes. So Seth Schein (1984.62) writes that “Homer was responsible for the religious view, characteristic throughout the archaic and classical periods, that emphasized human ignorance and powerlessness in the face of a higher cosmic order even while it made human beings the subjects and objects of all significant action, suffering, and speculation.” Edwards (1987.136), in his survey of Homeric scholarship, rescues Achilles’ image of Zeus holding up the scales to determine human fate from a dire fatalism by suggesting that the image is “obviously artistic, not religious.” And Hazel Barnes (1974.123) treats the gods as metaphors, even personifications, of inexplicable occurrences that do not render the Homeric characters as “powerless.” Instead, concludes Barnes (1974.123), that the characters believe themselves to be agents despite the intervention of the gods is really no different from our view of ourselves as having free will despite being “dependent on chance events in a world which we cannot control.”

In one of the few attempts to challenge this opposition between agency and chance, Martha Nussbaum has provided a critique of the ethical priority given to the agent’s mastery of luck. She argues, instead, for an account of human excellence and agency “that is inseparable from vulner-

ability” and “values openness, receptivity, and wonder” (Nussbaum 1986.20). Even though chance is given special attention in Nussbaum’s account, it still appears as a universally similar aspect of human existence. She defines luck as that which “does not happen through his or her own agency, what just *happens* to him, as opposed to what he does or makes” (Nussbaum 1986.3). This is fine as a starting point, but this is as far as Nussbaum takes the concept, shifting her focus immediately to an examination of “how much luck . . . these Greek thinkers believe we can humanly live with” (Nussbaum 1986.4).

Chance, whether from the perspective of Kantians, Hegelians, or Aristotelians like Nussbaum, is treated as having an objective existence; what varies is the nature of agency as it incorporates or accommodates itself to these objective occurrences. So the morally autonomous agent of Kant seeks to master luck, the morally self-conscious agent of Hegel integrates contingency into a greater self-consciousness, and the receptive agent for whom Nussbaum argues values the openness of human existence created by those moments beyond human control. I am arguing, instead, for an understanding of chance that is itself a cultural construction, one that does not exist apart from human agency, but is constituted by the cultural environment in which the agent acts.

This idea has its origins in the work of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1982.8) who, in writing about perceptions of risk, argue that “Risk taking and risk aversion, shared confidence and shared fears, are part of the dialogue on how best to organize social relations.” That is to say, risks are not self-evident, nor are they premised on objective observations of the world. Rather, perceptions of risk are the products of social relations in which meanings “are conferred on objects or events through social interaction” (Wildavsky 1987.4). As “common values” around which cultures organize “lead to common fears,” cultures will develop their own “risk portfolio[s],” emphasizing certain risks and ignoring others (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982.8). The organization of social relations, in turn, works to protect the culture from these perceived dangers through prescriptions and proscriptions expressed in customs, rituals, and more formal laws and institutions.³

3 See Douglas and Wildavsky 1982.8. Though not specifically addressing issues of chance, the work of Mary Douglas (1966, 1978, 1982) has been most useful in helping me think about this issue. See also Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990. This cultural approach does not posit a deterministic view of human perception. Quite the opposite. Cultural

In extending their work, we can understand chance as a form of risk. “Bad fortune,” as it affects us in ways that we cannot fully prepare for, points to aspects of life that we see as threatening (or, at a cultural level, destabilizing). What counts as risk, as something to be feared and guarded against, is tied to our values and beliefs, for we do not fear what does not matter. As these values are shared, we would expect to see social arrangements that are both premised on a particular understanding of chance and serve to regulate against the ill effects of bad fortune. What counts as “good fortune,” on the other hand, is accorded both the status of “good” and “fortune” by the values and expectations of a culture.

This suggests a far more complex understanding of chance than has been generally recognized. For chance itself comes to mean different things in different contexts: one culture’s chance is another’s just rewards. Furthermore, one does not just “respond to” or “act in the face of” chance, characterizations that are often made. Rather, how one acts is itself tied to perceptions of chance, to the type of danger posed, a danger that is both individually perceived and culturally reinforced.

CHANCE IN THE *ILIAD*

We must be somewhat cautious in talking about “chance” in the *Iliad* for several reasons. To begin with, there is no Homeric noun that corresponds to “chance.” We do see the use of the verb τυγχάνω that can have the meaning of “happen” or “chance upon,” often with the connotation of success or good fortune.⁴ Hera provides us with some sense of the word’s meaning in one passage in which she resolves to fight no longer

Theory suggests that although we enter a cultural environment of shared values and corresponding patterns of social relations, we, in some sense, are involved in “testing” these shared meanings, not against an objective, real “risk,” but against whether a way of life is able to deliver “on the expectations it has generated” (Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990.3–4). See also Douglas 1978.5–9.

- 4 Writes Edmunds 1975.191, “From the point of view of most Greek literature prior to Thucydides *tyche* is objective and is connected with the divine. *Tyche* comes from outside and is what befalls one.” See also J. H. Finley 1942.312–14 and Berry 1940.chap. 1. It is important to recognize that in the *Iliad* chance does not have the status of the divine, like the later figure of “Fortune.” But τυγχάνω does carry with it a meaning “what befalls someone (or something),” most often in the *Iliad* in reference to hitting or striking (or missing) something with an arrow or spear. The gods, as we will see, are not unrelated to the notion of chance, though.

with the other gods over the Trojans or Achaians. She tells Athene, “I can no longer / let us fight in the face of Zeus for the sake of mortals. / Let one of them perish then, let another live, as their fortune / wills (ὅς κε τύχη)” (8.427–30).⁵ At first glance, it would seem that Hera is distinguishing fortune from the intervention of the gods. But this is not the case, as Hera continues to explain, “let him,” speaking of the chief god of Olympus, “as is his right and as his heart pleases, / work out whatever decrees he will on Danaans and Trojans” (8.429–30). Chance, thus, does not exist in a realm removed from divine intention.

This view is consistent with the perceptions of the Homeric characters, perceptions of the cosmos as personal rather than impersonal. Divine intention is seen by the characters as infused in every action and outcome. I am not speaking about that characteristic of the Homeric epic referred to as “double motivation” in which we see both divine and human intentions, often ironically contrasted, behind important actions (see Edwards 1987.135). My observation takes this one step further by suggesting that outcomes that would appear completely random to us, in which intention is irrelevant to the outcome, are seen by Homeric characters as infused with intention.⁶

The choosing of lots in the *Iliad*, for example, occurs against the backdrop of an active and personal universe. In Book 3, lots are drawn to determine whether Menelaos or Paris will cast his spear first. As the lots are being shaken in a helmet, both sides pray to Zeus that “whichever man has made what has happened happen to both sides, / grant that he be killed and go down to the house of Hades” (3.321–22). When the Achaians later draw lots to see who will fight Hektor, again the people pray that the best warriors, those most capable of defeating Hektor, will draw the lot. We might initially see these two prayers as merely self-serving expressions of hope. But, in both instances, the lot is not drawn by an individual; rather, the lot “leaps” from the helmet.⁷ The prayers, then, appear as more than self-serving wishes. As divine intention is seen as infused in this event, the characters tie a seemingly random occurrence (from our perspective) to responsibility on the one hand and capability on the other.⁸ This observation

5 Translations, unless otherwise noted, are based on Lattimore 1951.

6 This contrast to modern, “impersonal” notions of chance is also pointed out in Cornford 1907.107.

7 The aorist of θρώσκω is used at 7.182 and the aorist of ὀρούω at 3.325.

8 This seems consistent with the later use of the lot by the Greeks for receiving counsel.

is important because it points to how incomprehensible we make the Homeric universe when we attempt to explain away or diminish the importance of the gods. It also suggests the difficulty of applying a modern conception of chance, which rests upon an impersonal universe, to the Homeric world.

When we speak of chance in the Homeric universe, we must carefully limit the discussion to those events that, from a human perspective, are both inexplicable and unintended. We will not be referring to occasions that can be attributed to psychological phenomena, such as when Agamemnon insists that his actions toward Achilles could be attributed to “delusion” (19.88).⁹ Nor will we be interested in events that are the result of specific decisions by or desires of the individual.¹⁰ We will, instead, look at four occurrences, occurrences that are inexplicable to and unintended by the characters, which have been chosen for two reasons. First, these examples seem to portray different responses of the characters to chance. This is important because of the frustration often expressed by Homeric scholars that gods intervene to change human fortune “by their own logic, which is inscrutable to mortals” (Yamagata 1994.187). Inscrutable, perhaps, but the Homeric characters never seem to be as perplexed as we think they should. Addressing this requires an examination of examples that, when looked at together, appear perplexing. Second, these scenes are immediately recognizable and referred to in other discussions of the role of the gods. Thus, I have sought to formulate my argument on the ground established by others. My claim is for a better interpretive scheme.

FOUR RESPONSES TO CHANCE

I return to Vernant’s suggestion that, as Homeric characters are tied to a divine and inscrutable order, they attribute their actions and intentions to this other realm. This leaves us with a puzzle: if Homeric characters seek to align their lives with a divine order, how do they respond to those occasions when, in the words of one character, “the divinity cuts across the plan (ἐπὶ μῆδεα κείρει)” of humans (15.467)?¹¹ We would expect, follow-

9 See Dodds 1957 for a discussion of the notions of the irrational in Homer.

10 I understand decision in this context to correspond more with the broader notion of desiring than the narrower, modern definition of “thought out.” See Vernant 1990b.

11 Lattimore 1951 translates μῆδεα as “intention.” I have chosen the term “plan” to avoid making assumptions at the outset about notions of agency.

ing Vernant's argument, that Homeric characters would seek as best they could to adjust their human aims to those of the gods. Yet this does not happen. In each of the four examples to be discussed, the characters attribute chance to divine intention, yet the characters do not always adjust their actions accordingly. Accounting for this will be the initial task of this article.

Example 1: In the midst of battle, a lightning bolt (hurled by Zeus) terrifies Diomedes' horses and causes Nestor to lose hold of the reins to his chariot. Nestor, calling out to Diomedes, interprets the bolt of lightning as a sign that "the power of Zeus no longer is with you" (8.140). Nestor's advice is to steer the chariot away in flight since "no man can beat back the purpose (νόον) of Zeus" (8.143). Diomedes hesitates, concerned that Hektor will say to the Trojans that Diomedes ran in fear, but Nestor is able to convince him of the wisdom of this plan of action. Nestor and Diomedes in this example act in accord with divine intention.

Example 2: In the middle of battle, as Teukros aims at Hektor, his bow breaks even though he had freshly rewound the bowstring that morning (thus adding to the unexpected nature of the change in fortune). This causes his arrow to be "driven crazily sidewise" (15.465). Teukros looks to Ajax and exclaims "See now, how hard the divinity cuts across the plan (ἐπὶ μῆδεα) / in all our battle" (15.467–68). Ajax counsels Teukros to "let your bow and your showering arrows / lie, now that the god begrudging the Danaans wrecked them" (15.472–73). But, continues Ajax, Teukros should pick up a spear and continue to hold off the Trojans: "Let them not, though they have beaten us, easily capture / our strong-benched ships. We must remember the frenzy of fighting" (15.476–77). Ajax convinces Teukros to maintain their course of action even when it seemingly conflicts with divine purposes.

Example 3: Hektor, as he faces Achilles alone, miscasts his spear and realizes that Deiphobos, his companion, is not with him. He concludes that he has been deceived by the gods who "have summoned me deathward" (22.297). Though believing now that the gods must have always been against him, he resolves that since his "death (μοῖρα)" is upon him, "Let me at least not die without a struggle, inglorious (ἀκλειῶς), / but do some big thing first, that men to come shall know of it" (22.303–05). This desire for remembrance has been often noted; what has received less attention is Hektor's expression that great deeds can be crafted even when they run contrary to the perceived intentions of the gods.

Example 4: During the chariot races in the funeral games, a

succession of accidents occurs. After the chariots have made the turn and are on the way back to the finish, Diomedes begins to close the distance to Eumelos, who is leading the race. Apollo causes the whip to fly from Diomedes' hand, resulting in Eumelos pulling ahead. Athene, seeing Apollo's "foul play," returns the whip to Diomedes and, in her anger, smashes the yoke of Eumelos' chariot. As Diomedes pulls out to a commanding lead, he sees that Athene has given strength to his horse and "to himself gave the glory" (23.400). Antilochos, too, in calling to the horses to run quicker, recognizes that Athene has given spirit to Diomedes' horses and glory to Diomedes. Antilochos does not seek to match this speed; he only wishes to catch Menelaos so as not to be mocked for being beaten by a mare. In anticipating the return of the horses, Idomeneus believes that Eumelos' horses must "have come to grief (ἔβλαβεν)" (23.461) since Eumelos can no longer be seen. Conjecturing about what might have happened to Eumelos, Idomeneus suggested that "it must be / that the reins got away from the charioteer, or he could not hold them / well in hand at the goal and failed (οὐκ ἐτύχησεν) to double the turn-post" (23.464-66). At the conclusion of the race, Achilles attempts to give second prize to Eumelos who, in actuality, finishes last. After some debate among the other contestants, Achilles finally gives Eumelos a separate prize, but one nonetheless dear to the chariot racer. The response to these series of accidents is to neither conform nor act contrary to divine intention but, instead, to rectify the results created by chance.

Scholarly explanations have been offered for each of these examples. But each explanation seems to account for the reactions to one incident, only to leave inexplicable the responses to the other incidents. Wolfgang Kullmann (1985.8), in drawing a distinction between the reactions of characters in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, argues that the gods serve as "an explanation for the tragic nature of life, not as a force guaranteeing justice." Using Athene's deception of Hektor as an example, Kullmann (1985.8) notes Hektor's "resigned attitude" toward the will of the gods. Unlike the characters in the *Odyssey* who reflect on the actions of the gods, "In the *Iliad* the heroes accept divine action as something fateful and inescapable . . ." (Kullmann 1985.8).

But we are left with an explanation that does not account fully for the reactions of the characters. Although Hektor does resign himself to his fate, he expresses an intention to continue to perform some great feat. Furthermore, we see no such fatalism in the example of Teukros, nor do we

see Achilles willing completely to accept godly intentions in the chariot races.

Another way of explaining these instances of chance is to contextualize them as literary expressions. Mark Edwards (1987.134) treats these interventions of the gods as devices to facilitate “the smooth working of the plot.” Through the intervention of the gods, heroes can be saved from unnecessary deaths, the “Greeks can be beaten, without losing too much face, because it is the will of Zeus,” and divine assistance “to the stronger man can be direct, and brings him additional honor” (Edwards 1987.134).¹² Similarly, although James Redfield (1994.229), in his recent response to Jasper Griffin, is careful to emphasize the variable quality of the gods, he nonetheless notes that the gods, as literary figures, “are often forced to intervene; they know how the story is supposed to go and have some responsibility for keeping it on course.” Redfield includes in this the specific example of Zeus sending the thunderbolt against Diomedes (Redfield 1994.230). Eric Havelock (1978.50) suggests that the gods serve as a “kind of shorthand” for inexplicable events. The reason the gods are used this way, argues Havelock (1978.42), is because the nature of oral composition necessitates more a “syntax of narrative rather than a syntax of analysis” that would seek to explain events in a sequence of cause and effect.¹³

Classifying these events as moments of poetic shorthand, though, risks reducing them to literary forms devoid of substance. This is problematic for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that even plot devices and literary inventions (if we want to accept them as such) must be plausible to the audience. This means that it is not enough to categorize these godly interventions against human intention as personifications of chance or explanations of the inexplicable; we must, in addition, inquire into how chance or the inexplicable are understood.

12 In his discussion of the role of the gods, Edwards 1987.134 provides a list of the different functions of the gods. If there is an organizing principle to this list, it is that the frivolity of divine action contrasts with the suffering of mortals. This is true enough, but does not provide a basis for understanding why and how the characters respond to this seeming contrast. See also Adkins 1960.15: “Evidently Apollo’s presence lessens the disgrace of Patroclus’ defeat; and to lessen this, as will appear, is of the utmost importance.”

13 Plutarch, too, in “How the Young Man Should Study Poetry” (23F–24C) (Babbitt 1960.125–27), notes that “those phases of causation which baffle our logic” were attributed to the gods by Homer before there was the name “Fortune.”

Willcock (1970.7), in his important essay on the Greek gods, goes some way toward addressing this connection between human action and the infusion of divine intention into chance when he suggests that although the dropping of the whip and the breaking of the yoke are “perfectly explicable as accidents in the race, and we may so rationalize them if we wish,” the restoration of the whip by Athene “is supernatural and not to be explained without the physical intervention of a god.” This intervention, though, is not the cause of as much as “the explanation” for success (Willcock 1970.6). “The interference of Athene, including the magical return to him of his whip, merely achieves what would be the proper result in any case. The natural victor wins” (Willcock 1970.7). Moreover, argues Willcock (1970.6), this alliance of the victor with the gods is consistent with an archaic belief “that it is not for humans to command success”; instead, “success implies the help of a god.”¹⁴

There are two aspects of his argument that lead to an incomplete explanation of the perceptions or reactions of the Homeric characters. First, with whom the gods side changes in the view of the characters, making the category of “natural victor” something known only after the fact.¹⁵ We can see this ambiguity arise in the chariot races in which Diomedes is characterized by the poet at the outset of the race as “by far the best (ἄριστος) of them all” (23.357). But Achilles characterizes Eumelos as “the best man (ᾧριστος)” (23.536). This does not do irreparable damage to Willcock’s thesis, as it could be argued that anyone can believe they have a chance of winning. Striving is fine, as Willcock notes. But since success is a gift of the gods, we might expect a general acceptance of the outcomes of human competition once the “natural” or divinely sanctioned result is clear. This is not the case, though. Achilles’ statement comes at the conclusion of the race when it is clear whom the gods have favored.

Second, Achilles’ response points to a silence in Willcock’s argument: what happens in cases of bad luck? Though the contestants

14 Schein 1984, in his overview of Homeric thought, essentially agrees that the gods are not causal agents but means of calling attention to the greatness of the victor. Schein 1984.58 argues that although “no rational explanation is available” for many of these “supernatural interventions,” they are “explicable in terms of the poem’s poetic structure, and in terms of what has been said about Athene and heroic success.” Schein 1984, however, does not include Willcock’s (1970) notion of the spirituality of the experience of divine intervention in his discussion.

15 See 3.439–40, 8.141–43, 15.724–25, 22.279–86, though Hektor is mistaken in this last case.

accept the good fortune that has come to Diomedes—even Achilles does not tinker with that result—Achilles does not similarly accept the outcome attributable to misfortune, as has befallen Eumelos. Even though Eumelos finishes last, because he is the “best man” according to Achilles, he determines to give Eumelos second prize, “as is suitable (ὥς ἐπιεικέες)” (23.537).¹⁶ One might well ask in what way second prize is “suitable” to Eumelos since he finished last. And, in fact, Antilochos, who finished second, raises this very question, suggesting that Eumelos “should have prayed to the immortal / gods. That is why he came in last of all in the running” (23.546-47). Achilles neither denies that the gods were involved nor seeks to take away the winner’s prize. But Achilles does not seem completely willing to accept the outcome as “natural,” either. Achilles does not quite command success, but he does attempt to give success where none was won.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF CHANCE

What is puzzling about Achilles’ actions, particularly given all that has been said by Vernant and Willcock (among others), is not that he seeks to make a companion feel better by allotting a better prize, but that he premises his action on a statement that though Eumelos finished last, he should receive second prize “as is suitable.” It is a scene that Adkins (1960.56) laments as “a hopeless tangle of values.” The rationale for Achilles’ position, a rationale that will help us begin to untangle some of these values, can be found earlier in his statement when he establishes that Eumelos is “the best man (ῥρίστος)” (23.536). Second prize is “suited” to Eumelos, not because he has done particularly well in the race, but because he is seen by Achilles as ῥρίστος.

This rationale requires some explanation. As the superlative of ἀγαθός, ῥρίστος describes “a class of people who are considered noble by birth and expected to be excellent warriors” (Yamagata 1994.203). There are, thus, two components to ῥρίστος: one status based and one premised on displayed attributes or excellences. These two components, though, are closely related. One is born ἀγαθός, which serves as a class title for the

16 Lattimore 1951 translates this as follows: “and well he deserves it.” I have chosen to avoid the term “deserve” because of the contemporary moral connotations it suggests. In particular, it becomes difficult to figure out why Eumelos would deserve a prize he did not fairly win.

warrior class. But one who is ἀγαθός is expected to display ἀρετή, or excellences appropriate to one's social status. These excellences for a warrior, about which we are reminded throughout the *Iliad*, would include courage, skill in fighting and counsel, and strength.¹⁷ But more than simply a set of competencies, ἀρετή serves as the basis for achieving fame and remembrance in the community. "The eternal glory of ἀρετή, either that of prowess or of cooperative virtues, is the substitute for immortality in the Homeric world" (Yamagata 1994.187). Likewise, the "greatest disgrace for the warrior class is to get a bad name of being a coward and lacking ἀρετή" (Yamagata 1994.236). As Sarpedon explains to Glaukos, since they are warriors they are honored above all others, given the best food and drink, and allotted desirable land. This position incurs a duty to fight courageously in battle. To do otherwise, to be "ignoble (ἀκλεέες)," would invite condemnation (12.318). Without ἀρετή, the privileges of an ἀγαθός appear not as a recognition of status by the community, but as the demands by an elite to feed upon the community.

The problem that arises for the Homeric characters is that though the gods can bestow ἀρετή, as Willcock notes, they can also strip the individual of ἀρετή, making beggars and wanderers of the best of men. In fact, it is my contention that accident or chance has its most profound effect on one's ἀρετή. Contrary to Willcock's (1970.7) assertion that moments of chance serve to confirm one's allotment by allying the gods with the "natural victors," chance can also serve to disrupt this congruence. In these situations, it is the response of the characters, whether individually or acting in a community capacity, to seek to restore a proportionate balance between ἀγαθός and ἀρετή.

This perspective allows us to better understand why Achilles responds as he does to the misfortune that befalls Eumelos. The accidents of the race create for Achilles an imbalance between Eumelos' status as ἄριστος and the community recognition of his excellences. To add to this imbalance, Eumelos is portrayed not simply as losing the race, but as arriving at the finish line with the skin from his elbows torn and his mouth, nose, and forehead lacerated. Eumelos' youthful countenance is despoiled, his "springing (θαλερῇ) voice . . . held fast within him" (23.397). As Vernant has argued in another context, the desire to defile the body of the

17 See Yamagata 1994.203, 189, 202–07, 187, 236.

enemy, as Achilles does to Hektor, is born of a desire to strip one's enemy of their ἀρετή. One's ἀρετή, argues Vernant, is closely tied to what he calls "the beautiful death" in which the heroic body is remembered for the beauty and splendor of its youth. In acting out these rituals of war in the funeral games, Eumelos returns despoiled. Achilles' act, then, appears as one of restoration of Eumelos' ἀρετή as he provides to Eumelos the community recognition of his excellence. Read from this perspective, Achilles is not saying that Eumelos really deserved to take second in the race; rather, giving a better prize would be suitable, or in proportion, to Eumelos' status. In this way, the community (with Achilles as distributor of the prizes) restores an equilibrium of status and character that is momentarily disturbed by the intervention of chance.

We can understand the responses of the characters in the other three examples as similar attempts to maintain a balance between status and the community's recognition of one's excellence. So, from Hektor's perspective, the bad luck he has encountered, including the vain casting of the spear and his mistaken belief that his companion was with him, does not change his destiny (μοῖρα) as much as bring it to fulfillment. This much is always accepted by the warriors and this, it would seem, is what Kullmann refers to as the tragic notion of life portrayed in the *Iliad*. But what Hektor is unwilling to accept is that this change of fortune will result in a permanent loss of ἀρετή, a loss that will cause him to die in disgrace. Hektor, thus, acts not to change his μοῖρα, but to correct the imbalance between his status as a warrior and his ἀρετή. Hektor determines to perform some last great deed, not to win, but to be remembered by his community. Hektor, like Achilles when he intervenes on behalf of Eumelos, looks to the community, not the gods, to restore the balance between his status and excellence.

When Teukros' bow breaks, we can understand Ajax's urging to Teukros to keep fighting as driven, at least initially, by the necessity of survival. And, in fact, there is some suggestion of that necessity when Ajax exclaims to the Argives that "here is the time of decision, whether / we die, or live on still and beat back ruin from our vessels" (15.502–03). But the reason Ajax gives for continuing to fight, even if they cannot win, is that it is better to "take in a single time our chances of dying / or living" than to run from "men worse than we are (χειροτέροισιν)" (15.511–13). To flee without a fight from one who is inferior is disgraceful, undermining one's ἀρετή. One must fight despite the change in luck, not to alter one's portion or μοῖρα, but to retain one's excellence and honor.

The final example, in which Nestor advises Diomedes that they align themselves with the intentions of Zeus and flee, differs dramatically from Hektor's decision to keep fighting. But this difference actually provides confirmation of our thesis. When Nestor suggests that they turn back, Diomedes protests, concerned that Hektor will boast to the other Trojans that Diomedes ran in fear. In this we see the counterpart to Hektor's desire to perform one last deed; namely, Diomedes' fear that if his last deed is that of running he will be remembered as lacking courage. To get Diomedes to follow his advice, Nestor must convince the young warrior that no one will ever believe Hektor if he "calls you a coward and a man of no strength (κακὸν καὶ ἀνάγκιδα φήσσει)" because of all the Trojans Diomedes had already "hurled in the dust in the pride of their manhood" (8.153, 156). The exchange again suggests the role chance plays in creating an imbalance between status and reputation. Only in this case, the response to bad luck is to accept it for now, but only because the loss of ἀρετή is not sufficient to require rectification.

Relating these examples back to our earlier discussion of how the perception of and response to chance are conditioned by cultural values and social interactions, we can see how the Homeric notion of chance appears to reflect a cultural concern with the destabilization of hierarchical gradations of rank. Though chance can give one ἀρετή, more critically it can undermine ἀρετή, creating an imbalance between one's rank and one's recognized excellences. This poses a particular problem for a hierarchical society because the lack of ἀρετή threatens the class privileges and status claims of the warriors. Neither the individual nor the community simply accept the results of chance but seek, instead, to manage chance by restoring ἀρετή in proportion to one's status as ἀγαθός. The response to chance, thus, serves as a reaffirmation of the status ranking of Achaian and Trojan society.

If notions of chance are culturally constituted, as we have suggested, it seems appropriate to contrast how chance is constituted in another kind of culture, one characterized, in Douglas' and Wildavsky's terms, by competitive individualism, or liberalism.¹⁸ In the case of liberalism, chance threatens to undermine the notion of individual equality upon which liberal economic and political structures are premised. We can see this understand-

18 This makes use of the grid-group categories employed by Douglas and Wildavsky. See Douglas 1978 and Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990.

ing of chance enter into the work of John Rawls in his influential theoretical work on the foundation of social justice. Rawls (1971.12) posits at the start a hypothetical original situation in which no person knows “his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities.” It is essential for Rawls’ liberalism that principles of justice be formulated upon a foundation of equality to insure “that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstance” (Rawls 1971.12). Where chance in a hierarchical culture is viewed as disruptive of natural differences or inequalities, it is seen in liberalism as creating undeserved inequities. Chance violates the prescriptive rules of status differentials in a hierarchy, whereas it infringes on the procedural rules of equal opportunities in a liberal society.¹⁹

Such a Rawlsean original situation, though, cannot be maintained: chance happens. Some individuals are advantaged, others disadvantaged, by the operation of chance. We would expect, then, that liberalism would provide a cultural response to chance that confirms its individualistic, competitive social and economic structures. Indeed, as chance is seen as random and impersonal, bad luck is understood more as a temporary phenomenon that may become good luck with continued effort. In a culture of entrepreneurial individualism, we see certain stories downplayed, such as those in which misfortune eventually drives a person to destitution. On the other hand, we see the validation of rags-to-riches tales in which the individual invariably meets at some point with bad luck. With the continued taking of risks, though, eventually hard work pays off and one reaps the rewards of effort.²⁰ The struggle for riches takes place in a competitive, individualist culture against the backdrop of a benign universe, one that does not actively frustrate human intention and effort. In the Homeric world, however, chance never works in such a way that one who is not ἀγαθός suddenly gains ἀρετή. Upward mobility, even by chance, is simply out of the question.

19 See Douglas and Wildavsky 1982.97.

20 While working on this article, I came across this statement by Bill Gates, founder and CEO of Microsoft Corp., in an airline magazine: “This willingness to take risks is supported by American culture, which admires effort when it ends in defeat. The United States lets people rebound. The American attitude toward failure is ‘try again’” (Gates 1995.61). Strikingly, Gates both identifies and reaffirms the construction of chance in an individualist culture.

CHANCE AND HUMAN AGENCY

This notion of Homeric characters managing chance, or at least the consequences of chance, should strike us as interesting for a number of reasons, not the least of which, as Bernard Williams (1993.150) points out in his recent series of essays, is that for many of the archaic writers, “human beings were largely powerless against fate and chance.” This is because individuals lack freedom to the extent “that my choices or opportunities are not merely limited, as they are in all these cases, but that they are designedly and systematically limited, by another person who is shaping my actions to his intentions” (Williams 1993.154).

It is this same notion of freedom as choice and action without systematic restraint that Vernant identifies as the very foundation of human agency. As Vernant (1990b.49) writes, “In action the agent is recognized as preeminent; the human subject is assumed to be the origin and efficient cause of all the actions that stem from him.” Furthermore, “In his relations with others and with nature, the agent apprehends himself as a kind of center of decision, holding a power that springs neither from the emotions nor from pure intelligence” but from the “indivisible power” of the will “to say yes or no, to acquiesce or refuse” (Vernant 1990b.49–50). The freedom that Vernant refers to, though, goes beyond the notions of accountability and intention that Williams associates with agency and extends to a notion of metaphysical freedom, a belief that there can be no constraints on human intention even if there may be certain structural constraints that impact on our actions.²¹

And, in fact, in large part because of this metaphysical tradition, we ask, “Are the Homeric characters free?” The answer to the question is invariably filled with qualifiers as we recognize that such notions as free will and determinism are later categories into which the Homeric world only partly fits. The problem is that in framing the question this way we import a notion of the relationship between human agency and what might be called contingency that requires that we either diminish the role of the gods, treating them as less than serious actors in the world, or restrict the possibility of action as an expression of the human will. I have sought to confront this framework by highlighting incidents of chance that are seen

21 Williams 1993.152 does not agree with Vernant 1990b that such metaphysical freedom should serve as the basis for defining a notion of human agency.

by many as the clearest examples of utterly capricious gods imposing their intentions on the human world. Yet, I want to advance the somewhat ironic claim that it is in these moments of chance that we can see created a “space of action,”²² a space that is itself culturally constituted. By returning to each of the four examples, we can begin to reconceptualize the meaning of Homeric agency, so that the beliefs of the agent are grounded in this Homeric space, rather than in a western metaphysical tradition. This will help us understand not only the nature of human agency in the *Iliad*, but how the agent’s quest for glory is tied to, and supportive of, the hierarchical needs of Homeric society.

In rejecting Bruno Snell’s argument that Homeric characters lack “innerness,” Bernard Williams (1993.40) suggests that “there is surely enough of the basic conceptions of action for human life: the capacities to deliberate, to conclude, to act, to exert oneself, to make oneself do things, to endure.” And a look at the four examples in this essay, examples that arise at points at which the gods are most active in their intervention, provides strong support for this contention. In the scene in which Nestor suggests to Diomedes that they retreat since Zeus now appears to be against them, both accept Nestor’s formulation of Zeus’ purpose, yet they still engage in a debate about which course of action, retreating or fighting, would be better. Furthermore, the debate moves from an exchange between two characters to a debate within one character, Diomedes. When Nestor more adamantly insists upon retreating, Diomedes “pondered between two ways (διάνδιχα μερμήριζεν)” (8.167)²³ and “three times in his heart and spirit he pondered turning (τρίς μὲν μερμήριξε κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν)” (8.169). This sort of conscious deliberation, born of neither pure emotion nor pure intellect but of the heart and spirit, is, even by Vernant’s standards, characteristic of human agency.

So, in the example in which Teukros’ bow unexpectedly breaks, Ajax tells Teukros to lay down the bow “now that the god begrudging the Danaans wrecked them” (15.473). Recognizing this, though, does not seem to inhibit action. Ajax, instead, tells Teukros to fight with a spear to protect the ships and ends his statement with “We must remember (μνησώμεθα)

22 Williams 1993.142 depicts this space as a moment of choice an individual may have that exists before the convergence of outcomes that display “the shape of the purposive.” Thus, action still takes place outside the purposive space of the Homeric world.

23 Lattimore 1951 translates this phrase as “pondered doubtfully.”

the frenzy of fighting (χάρμης) (15.477). It seems difficult to understand Ajax's injunction without a notion of agency, for though Ajax enjoins Teukros to fight, it is an injunction that appeals to the internal quality of an agent, the memory of battle.

The scene continues with Ajax speaking to the other Achaians, providing his assessment of the increasingly bleak situation. The choice facing the Argives, according to Ajax, is "whether / we die, or live on still and beat back ruin from our vessels" (15.502–03). Ajax then calls upon his companions to think about the consequences of failing to fight: "Do you expect (ἐλπεςθε), if our ships fall to helm-shining Hektor, / you will walk each of you back dryshod to the land of your fathers?" (15.504–05). Ajax suggests, instead, that they continue fighting in close combat, claiming that "there can be no design (νόος), no plan (μήτις), better than this one" (15.509). Even in the chaos of war, Ajax provides a view of agents as the centers of decisions, their deliberations counting in matters of life and death.

There are intimations of this notion of action in the other two examples as well. We see in Hektor's last moments a determination to undertake one last struggle even though he knows he is doomed. This incident serves as an important counterexample to Adkin's (1960.47) claim that in Homeric society "intentions are almost irrelevant." We cannot make sense of Hektor's actions if outcome is all that matters, for Hektor ties the hope of remembrance to his struggle, not his success. His last deed is to try, and for that he is remembered.²⁴

We can gain, perhaps, the best visual image of the space of action as Achilles attempts to find a just distribution of prizes after the chariot races, an effort made necessary by the intervention of the gods. It is a space that does not stand opposed to the gods, but one that is conditioned by a particular cultural understanding of, and response to, the gods. We do not have free-floating human agents seeking to assert their "freedom" in the world; instead, action, as it is constituted by Homeric culture, occurs within the realm of one's allotment.²⁵ But it is a realm in which the characters nevertheless, as in the chariot races, argue (23.542), judge (23.574), appease, and are appeased (23.606).

24 For a discussion of the importance of "trying" as part of a Homeric ethic, see Long 1970.124.

25 This helps us understand why τυγχάνω in its past perfect form is related to having brought something to fulfillment. See, for example, *Il.* 14.53 and 14.220.

As Williams suggests, part of the reason Snell and others have rejected a notion of agency in Homeric society derives from an assumption that the will is an ethical will in which action is guided by the moral determinations of an autonomous self. Williams (1993.41) argues that Homeric notions of action “did *not* revolve round a distinction between moral and nonmoral motivations.” Lacking these motivations as a basis for decision should not “make us think that therefore in the Greek picture of things people did not decide or did not decide for themselves or could not make themselves do things” (Williams 1993.41). Rather, the discussion should be about “what kinds of reasons people should, or perhaps can, have for their actions, not about whether they act for reasons at all or exercise their will in doing so” (Williams 1993.41). What I have sought to do is more fully develop this notion of action, one that I have suggested is premised on the individual pursuit of particular excellences.

In developing this notion of action, though, we are not left, as is Adkins, with explaining how the “competitive values” he associates with ἀρετή do not pull the community apart. Adkins gives us every reason to believe that such a competitive scheme will exert an extraordinary strain on the community, not only because the claims of an ἀγαθός can ultimately override all other claims of the community, but also because Homeric society lacks any organization to mediate conflicting claims of those who are ἀγαθοί.²⁶

We can now see how Homeric society constructs the notion of action in such a way that the excellences to which Adkins points are tied to an issue of community maintenance. What keeps Homeric society together are not well-developed political institutions that serve to mediate a competitive ethos.²⁷ Rather, what underlies Homeric society is how this ethos is itself defined within the context of a hierarchical society. This is no small issue, for it tells us that although excellence appears to create a competitive individualism, it is an excellence that is carefully tied to the internal status gradations of society. It is in this context that we can better appreciate A. A. Long’s (1970.138) critique of Adkins that “the language used to decry an ἀγαθός for some deficiency is often used to condemn him for some excess.”

26 See Adkins 1960.37–38, 40, 50, 52. This is a problem not unique to Homeric culture, but faced by all hierarchic cultures. See Douglas and Wildavsky 1982.90–91.

27 For a discussion of the centrifugal forces acting on Homeric communities, see Donlan 1980.chap. 1 and M. I. Finley 1979.

Such cultural constraints work because they become internalized as part of Homeric intentional action. When chance results in the loss of ἀρετή, the restoration of the warrior's reputation becomes a product both of individual intention and community interest, whether we are speaking about how deeds will be remembered, as was Hektor's concern, or of the active recognition on the part of Achilles on behalf of the community of the excellence of Eumelos. We must posit a notion of agency that is itself tied to the cultural context of Homeric society, a society in which one's allotment serves not to oppose, but to define the realm of action. To do otherwise, to demand a notion of metaphysical freedom, requires us to entangle the Homeric characters in a language they do not understand.

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