

## Introduction Part 4

### The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Iliad*

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## Introduction Part 4

### The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Iliad*

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This reading comes from the Cave's  
*The Best of Homer's Iliad*.

ANGER. THE FIRST book of the *Iliad* begins with what amounts to a fireworks finale of anger. Chryses, the priest of Apollo, is angry at Agamemnon for refusing to return his daughter, Chryseis, to him for a generous ransom. Following this refusal, when Chryses prays to Apollo for revenge, the god becomes furious at Agamemnon. As a result, he casts a deadly plague onto the Achaeans. Nine days go by. When the seer Calchas reveals that Agamemnon's refusal to return Chryseis is the reason for the plague, Agamemnon is livid — "his heart was black with raging passion, and his eyes flashed fire." He's even angrier when Achilles tells him to return the girl to her father. *Why*, he asks, *should he lose his honor-prize with-*

*out compensation?* When Agamemnon finally threatens to take Achilles' honor-prize, Briseis, to make up for his own loss, Achilles is irate. It is this anger, the famous "wrath of Achilles," that is at the center of the *Iliad*.

Wrath! Sing, goddess, about the destructive wrath of Achilles, the son of Peleus—the anger that caused so much pain and suffering among the Achaeans.<sup>1</sup>

But what is the significance of anger in the *Iliad*? Stated simply, anger is a form of desire. Rather than being a desire *for* something clearly and directly, however, it is more directly and clearly *against* some-

thing. As such, anger (*cholos*) or wrath (*mēnis*) is always the direct negative expression of an indirect positive desire for something in Homer. Negatively, anger-desire is an aversion; it communicates what it does not want—what it does not wish to happen, past, present, or future. Positively, it expresses what it wants. As such, it serves to defend a person's portion, what he or she has in terms of wealth, power, status, reputation, honor, and other desired things of life.

In Achilles' case, the positive desire is to retain the girl Briseis, his honor-prize, and, therefore, to maintain his honor before others, the sense that he is somebody. When he later speaks with his mother, Thetis, Achilles complains that Agamemnon has dishonored him by taking the girl. "The wide-ruling son of Atreus has dishonored me since by force he has robbed me of my honor-prize [Briseis]."<sup>2</sup> Doing so, Agamemnon has treated him like a coward (*deilos*) and a nobody (*outidanos*).<sup>3</sup> From his own words, then, we know that Achilles' anger-desire is largely about shame avoidance, dodging the shame of being judged a coward, of losing honor before all the other men. Conversely, or positively, it is about his great desire to be counted somebody important, and so to be honored.

The same is true for Agamemnon's anger over losing Chryseis. He too must have something to make up for his lost honor and thus status. Speaking to Achilles, he says,

What—will you keep your own honor-prize while I sit here without one? I tell you what, have the Achaeans hand over something that is pleasing to me, an honor-prize that is suitable to my status and worth just as much as the girl is. But if they refuse to offer it up, I'll come myself and seize one with my own mighty hands! I'll come for your prize or that of Telamonian Ajax or Odysseus! And once I take it, I'll carry it off! Then we'll see who's angry!

Yes, anger-desire must protect Agamemnon's honor and status. The problem with anger, however, is that it has serious negative consequences. Not only

does Achilles'—and Agamemnon's—anger disrupt the unity of the Achaean army, but it is responsible for the deaths of many Achaean men, including Achilles' dear friend Patroclus. Homer explains that "his anger sent many strong souls—the breath-like phantoms of men—down to the dark hall of Hades."<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, Achilles later wishes that this kind of anger, and the strife it spawns, would disappear from the face of the earth:

May strife utterly perish from among both the gods and men, and anger that incites a wise man to be savagely angry—an anger that drips like very sweet honey and expands like smoke in the breast of a man, growing ever larger. Even so has the lord of men Agamemnon now provoked me to anger.<sup>5</sup>

Admittedly, he is wildly out of his mind with sorrow when he wishes that anger would disappear, and strife. Nevertheless, his prayer reveals something true: anger leads to strife; and strife often means the loss of loved ones, as it does in the *Iliad*, when he loses Patroclus. After the fact, Achilles knows that if he could somehow go back in time and cause the former anger (and strife) to disappear, then the latter man would reappear.

Alas, given Homer's competitive world, it isn't possible for anger to just vanish. It is too important of an emotional driver for desired things like honor and a defender against undesired things like shame. For without wisdom, skill, and courage, on the one hand, and anger, black-hearted revenge, and violent strife on the other, how would one seek honor and avoid shame?

*Shame.* Shame avoidance is one of the great motivators in the *Iliad*, in which shame (*aidōs*) is the belittling and denigration of one's reputation and status (what others say about one, and one's consequent standing among them), and so the erosion of one's ability to satisfy desire. Like anger, shame avoidance is actually a desire—the desire for honor and a positive reputation, the desire to be called "good."

Generally speaking, Homer terms the heroes of the *Iliad* "good" (*agathos* or *esthlos*)—that is, good and noble

men, brave and strong. The last thing any hero wants a reputation for is cowardice (*kakotēs*). In fact, a man will go so far as to declare he would rather be dead than be revealed a coward. This is so because the coward (*deilos*) is known as a bad man (*kakos*)—he is weak (*analkis*) and ugly (*aischros*).<sup>6</sup>

According to Odysseus, it is the coward who retreats from battle. However afraid the good or noble man may be, he cannot flee from a fight. Speaking to himself amid “the throng of men,” Odysseus says, “I know that only cowards run off from a fight, and that those who are the best in battle feel a great need to make a mighty stand, whether he hits and drops his man or the other hits and drops him.”<sup>7</sup> Another time, the hero Diomedes chastises Odysseus for speeding away from battle toward the ships. (In his defense, all the Achaean heroes are fleeing thanks to the sound of Zeus’ thunder, which signifies a shift in the god’s favor toward the Trojans.) Diomedes calls out, “God-born son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus, why are you running off with your back turned like a coward? May some man not plant a spear in your back while you flee!”<sup>8</sup>

For Homeric Greeks, the bad man or coward deserves nothing and has no leading role to play in the assembly or on the battlefield. For this reason, the good and brave man must stand up for what is his own in a fight. Simply put, he must *be a man*. “O friends, be men!” Nestor calls out to the Achaeans. “And drum up in your spirits a sense of shame and self-respect before other men . . . I implore you to be ready and make a mighty stand, and not turn back in panicked flight.”<sup>9</sup>

The “sense of shame,” here, signifies the desire to avoid shame. Similarly, when Hector gives the reason for the need to make a stand in the last moments of his life, it is all about avoiding shame and maintaining his sense of honor. Oh, and winning glory.

*Honor and glory (reputation).* Hector is standing alone before Troy, and Achilles, the best of the Achaeans, is barreling straight for him, full of rage over Patroclus’ death at Hector’s hands. The obvious thing for Hector to do would be to flee into the city. (Many of us would do so, anyway!) In fact, Hector considers

this option. But as any other Homeric hero knows, he knows that behaving in such a manner is what a shameful coward would do. Not only that but “some cowardly man” would blame him, he fears, for his recklessness in leading the Trojan army to destruction.

So it is that Hector ends up standing his ground to face Achilles in the hope that he will win the glory-boast (*euchos*). “It would be better,” he says, “to encounter each other quickly in combat to see which one of us the Olympian will grant the glory-boast.”<sup>10</sup> And when he finally comes to know that he has likely been beaten, that “the gods have lured me to my death,” he says to himself, “now my fate has come! Let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that men to come will hear about!”<sup>11</sup>

Achilles similarly chooses glory (*kleos*) over life. When in Book 9 the embassy comes from Agamemnon to seek reconciliation with him, Achilles explains that his mother revealed two possible fates for the course of his life. One, he could stay home in Phthia and have a long life without glory. Or, two, he could go to Troy and win everlasting glory on the battlefield before the city’s walls.

My goddess mother, the silver-footed Thetis, tells me that there are two possible fates carrying me toward the fulfillment of death. If I stay here and fight nearby the city of the Trojans, then I give up my return home, but my glory will never die. But if I return home to the land I love, then I give up my noble glory, yet my life will be very long.<sup>12</sup>

For Achilles, the choice is obvious. Good men, brave and noble men, choose glory. That’s why Achilles is so upset when Agamemnon dishonors him by seizing Briseis, his honor-prize. Agamemnon has shamed him by treating him like a bad man, a cowardly nobody, the very opposite of a good and brave man. In short, he’s sullied his honor (*timē*) and reputation (*kleos*)—everything Achilles came to Troy to obtain. Whereas Hector employs violence to win glory against Achilles in his last battle, Achilles em-

ploy wrath or anger against Agamemnon to restore his own honor. Either way, both men are competing to maintain their reputation, which amounts to their status held among the other men and, therefore, their ability to obtain what they desire.

*Competition in word and deed; being the best.* During the embassy to Achilles, Phoenix reminds his charge of why his father sent him with Achilles to Troy in the first place. He explains that before coming to Troy, Achilles was “a silly child and knew nothing yet of distressing war nor of assemblies in which men stand out from others”—and consequently win honor, glory, and a reputation. “For this reason,” Phoenix goes on, “[Peleus] sent me with you to instruct you in all these matters, to be a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.”<sup>13</sup> Some time later, Nestor recalls that “Old Pel-eus enjoined his child Achilles to always be the best and to stand out among other men.”<sup>14</sup> The command to “be the best and to stand out” was a directive to practice excellence or virtue (*aretē*).

We learn two important points about Homer’s world from Phoenix’s and Nestor’s statements. One, the goal of all behavior for Homeric men is to be preeminent, to stand out from others, to be the best or to possess excellence. This in turn leads to honor and glory and the kind of reputation one would want, to be known for being the best. Two, the means by which a man is the best and stands out from others are various competitions. Phoenix mentions battle and speaking in the assembly. If we round these out with athletic competitions such as chariot racing, boxing, foot racing, wrestling, and the like, then we will understand the major arenas in which men competed for and won a reputation in Homer’s world.

That said, standing out or being the best isn’t always up to a human being’s efforts alone. Rather, to a large extent, being great is up to Fate and the gods.

*Fate and the gods (and good fortune).* To the point, it is Fate and the gods that determine whether a human being will live or die, be great or not, remembered or not, and so have the kind of honor, glory, and reputation that all Homeric heroes desire.

What is Fate in Homer? Simply put, Fate is that which apportions the world, giving each god and man

his portion (the Greek is *moira*, portion, whereas *Moirai* is Fate, or portion personified).<sup>15</sup> After his death at the hands of Achilles, Hector’s mother Hecuba acknowledges that “mighty Fate” spun this particular end for him “at his birth, when his mother bore him.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Zeus recognizes that his mortal son Sarpedon “is fated to be struck dead by Patroclus.”<sup>17</sup> And such is his end.

It is not always possible to distinguish the apportioning action of Fate from the determining action of the gods. Rather, they seem to act in tandem. Patroclus, for instance, explains to Hector that “Zeus, the son of Cronus, and Apollo have readily given you victory over me.” He goes on to add, “Destructive Fate and the son of Leto [Apollo] have killed me”—these along with the humans who struck him down.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, the god Ares allows that “it may be my fate to be struck with the bolt of Zeus and lie low in blood and dust among the dead”—an admission revealing that fate (or Fate) somehow operates through the gods.<sup>19</sup>

If Fate is the divine apportioner, then Fate through the gods ultimately determines who lives or dies, has strength or doesn’t, wins or loses, obtains glory or doesn’t, and who gets what in terms of various good or bad things. As for the latter, which is to say good or bad fortune, Achilles tells Priam that the gods plan sorrows for humans and that Zeus has two large jars on the golden floor of his house from which he dispenses good and bad things to human beings.

For while the gods plan sorrow upon sorrow for wretched mortals, they live without any sorrow or grief. . . . On the floor of Zeus’ house, there are two jars from which he gives gifts. The one is filled with evil and the other with good. To whomever Zeus, who delights in thunder, mixes and gives out both, that man will meet now with good and now with evil fortune. But for the man who only receives evil gifts—ah, that man will suffer shameful treatment. Evil poverty and hunger will drive him back and forth over the earth, and neither the gods nor men will honor him.

Achilles goes on to catalogue a variety of goods, “glorious gifts,” that his own father, Peleus, received “from

the moment of his birth,” that is, thanks to Fate. Among other goods, “he ruled over the Myrmidons, surpassing all other men in happiness and wealth.” Achilles also acknowledges the fact that Priam was “once happy” in that he “surpassed the rulers of all the lands surrounding [his] own” in “wealth and number of offspring.”<sup>20</sup>

Zeus and the other gods are similarly responsible for strength, victory, and glory. For instance, when Nestor persuades Diomedes to retreat, he shouts,

Son of Tydeus, turn your horses in flight! Don’t you see that Zeus isn’t giving you strength? No, he’s giving glory to Hector today. Tomorrow, if he wills it, he’ll grant us glory. Whatever the case, no man, however brave he is, may thwart the will and purpose of Zeus, for he is stronger than all men are.<sup>21</sup>

After battling him in single combat, Hector tells Telamonian Ajax that they should “stop the fighting and battle-strife for today.” He clarifies the point by promising that “in the days to come we’ll fight again and let some god decide who is better, giving victory to one side or another.”<sup>22</sup>

Whoever wins in the *Iliad* is happy—at least for the moment. We see this most clearly when a hero is busy slaughtering the enemy and thereby winning a glory report.

*The glory report* (traditionally called an *aristeia*<sup>23</sup>). In Book 11 of the *Iliad*, Hector realizes a change of fortune in his favor after the Trojan man Coön wounds Agamemnon. Calling out to his men, commanding them to “be men, friends, and remember the strength and valor by which you rush into the fight,” he tells them that Zeus “has now granted me the glory-boast (*euchos*).” Accordingly, he urges them to “drive your chariots straight at the strong Danaans, so that you may raise up an even greater glory-boast.” Homer in turn asks the Muses—their knowledge is implied—to reveal which men Hector was able to slay first and last “now that Zeus granted him glory (*kudos*).”<sup>24</sup> What follows is a list of men, some nine in all, killed by Hector. And, Homer says, Hector would have slain more if Odysseus had not stepped up to Diomedes to remind

him of what a shameful dishonor it would be if they allowed Hector to take the ships.

In a way that is perhaps hard for contemporary readers to understand, the whole *Iliad* is a glory report for Achilles. It is the story—however tragic—of Achilles heroically employing anger in order to avoid shame and restore his honor and reputation. As said before, the unfortunate aspect of this strategy is that it ends up leading to a great deal of suffering—so much, in fact, that Homer tells us it is impossible to count it all.

But this is normal in the pursuit of one’s portion and glory that confer status and the ability to satisfy desire. One man’s victory means another man’s death. One man’s satisfaction means another man’s dissatisfaction—or suffering.

*Suffering.* In the first few lines of the *Iliad*, Homer asks the Muse to sing about “the destructive wrath of Achilles . . . that caused so much pain and suffering among the Achaeans.” Next to glory reporting, which the poet frequently engages in, Homer seems to relish recounting how it is that various men suffer in the *Iliad*. For example, one of the distinctive features of the poem is the way Homer describes the oftentimes very violent and gruesome battle deaths. Eyeballs pop out. Brains smashed to mush. Blood gushing from gaping wounds, the ground soaked with a man’s life.

There are a few reasons for these graphic descriptions of suffering. One, the suffering of one man serves to glorify another. When Hector slays a man in battle, and the man dies a truly horrific death, then Hector himself stands out. He is superior to that man. Frequently, the victorious warrior stands over the loser on the ground glory-boasting. Though ultimately an empty boast since Diomedes lives, Lycaon’s glory-boast to Diomedes is typical: “You’re hit! I hit you through the belly! And I don’t think you’ll be standing for very long. No, you’ve granted me a great glory-boast!”—which is to say, *I won and you didn’t; therefore, I’m better than you and other men are.*

Two, a man must suffer to accomplish anything great and therefore stand out among others. The truth is Achilles and his men are bored when Achilles

withdraws from the battle. But the boredom is worth it. So too is Patroclus' death in the end. The simple fact is that the price of glory is oftentimes suffering. Indeed, the whole Trojan War that is fought to avoid the shame of losing Helen and to restore Menelaus' honor and glory is ten long years of suffering hell. Or so declares Nestor in the *Odyssey*.

*Endurance.* But that's to be expected—suffering is the norm in Homer's world. According to one scholar, Homer's epic poems are full of "sleep-depriving anxiety, hellish war, debilitating injury, grizzly death, worming sorrow, gnawing homesickness, deplorable betrayal, and tunic-wetting fear."<sup>25</sup> The logical question that follows, then, is what to do about all the suffering. The answer: to get to the other side of a situation involving suffering, one must learn to endure. It's a must. Even the gods must endure. When Aphrodite goes off crying to her mother, Dione, after Diomedes wounds her, the blood-like ichor flowing from the wound on her delicate hand, her mother matter-of-factly tells her she must endure the suffering. "Endure, my child, and bear all your troubling distress."<sup>26</sup> In Homer's *Odyssey*, the point is made again and again relative to humans. To give one example, the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa admonishes Odysseus to put up with whatever suffering Zeus has given him.

Since Olympian Zeus himself dispenses fortune and happiness to men, to both the good and the bad as he wills, whether he be brave or a coward, noble or base—so I believe that surely he has given misfortune to you. Regardless, you must endure it either way.<sup>27</sup>

Fortunately, humans come well-equipped to handle suffering. As Apollo explains to the gods in the last book of the *Iliad*, "the Fates put an enduring spirit into men."<sup>28</sup> Utilizing this natural ability to endure, then, men and women can get to the other side and, let's hope, arrive at something better—preferably happiness.

*Happiness.* In Homer, happiness is rather straightforward: it is the satisfaction of desire. The good, happy life is full of the experience and satisfaction of things desired—from the desire for life itself and the

avoidance of death, to the satisfaction of desire for things like good food, a warm bath, sex, and various forms of entertainment. Other desiderata include the desire to be part of a household that will help a man secure all these good things and defend the ones he already has. But let's be honest. If you're a Homeric hero, you want the best of all things—the best women, the best seat in the feasting hall, the best cuts of meat, and the choicest wine. And you want power over others, the ability to harness their collective strength and marshal them for your own purposes. For this, you need to stand out among men. Accordingly, you require status, one built on the firm foundation of a solid reputation. Consequently, you desire honor and glory, which both confer the kind of reputation you hope for. In the end, therefore, we see that to be an honorable and glorious man, the kind who avoids shame, is to be a happy man.

This fact explains why Achilles is so angry. In attacking him, in seizing his honor-prize, Briseis, Agamemnon has stolen Achilles' happiness from him by slighting his honor and making of him a nobody. So in the end, the *Iliad* is really about happiness. Yes, it is an epic poem about Achilles' anger or wrath. But seen for what it truly is, his anger is a rearguard action to defend his happiness. And that's why we feel sympathy for Achilles. We understand the hero because we can all relate to his urgent and profound desire to be happy.

This only makes sense. According to Aristotle's fourth century BC treatise the *Nicomachean Ethics*, happiness is what every human desires and the ultimate thing that every human shoots for.<sup>29</sup> The big question is how we should aim for happiness. Is anger-fueled competition in warfare, the assembly, and athletic competition the best means by which to seek the good life? Is it happy-making for one group of men to attack another group and sack their city in order to get wealthy and obtain glory?

If we listen closely to Homer, perhaps it's not.<sup>30</sup> But that possibility is far beyond the scope of this brief introduction to the *Iliad*. For now, it is enough to know that such competition for happiness was the norm in Homer's world

So ends “Introduction Part 4: The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Iliad*.” **See you in the next item, “The Cast of Gods and Men—A Quick Reference.”**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Homer, *Iliad* 1.1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 1.355-356.

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, 1.293-294, where Achilles interrupts Agamemnon and observes, “The men will call me a coward and a nobody if I give in to you!” Though he ultimately allows Agamemnon to take Briseis, this one line lets us know what Achilles’ anger is really about.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1.3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 18.107-111.

<sup>6</sup> *Kakos* oftentimes simply means a “coward” or a “cowardly man.” The *kakos* man is the opposite of the *agathos*, the brave and good man.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 11.401-410.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.93-95.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 15.661-666.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 22.129-130.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22.304-305.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.410-415. Related to *kleō* (to tell of, make famous, celebrate), *kleos* also signifies one’s reputation, what one is reputed for—that is, the (typically good) things one is known for, what others say about one.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.440-443.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.783-784.

<sup>15</sup> The goddess of destiny, Aisa, or one’s appointed lot or destiny, also shows up in the *Iliad*. As for the three goddesses of fate, the *Klōthes* or Spinners, they do not. In the *Odyssey*, however, Homer mentions them relative to Odysseus: “When he gets home he will suffer whatever fate that the grievous Spinners spun out for him with their flaxen thread when he came to be on the day his mother gave birth to him” (7.196-198). In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, a work slightly later than the *Iliad*, Themis (with Zeus) produces “the Fates (*Moirai*) to whom Zeus the counselor offered the greatest honor. These are Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos, the ones who grant mortal human beings their portions of good and evil” (905-907).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 24.209-210.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.434.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 16.844-845, 849-850.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 15.117-118. Interestingly, it also reveals that the gods are somehow fated.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 24.525-546.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.139-144.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 7.290-292.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, the orator Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-112 AD) calls such a glory report “the telling . . . of the excellence or excellent deeds (*aristeia*) of Hector” (*Oration* 11.83).

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 11.284-290 and 11.299-304.

<sup>25</sup> Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life* (Sugar Land: EuZōn Media, 2015), 246.

<sup>26</sup> *Iliad* 5.382.

<sup>27</sup> *Odyssey* 6.188-190.

<sup>28</sup> *Iliad* 24.49.

<sup>29</sup> For more on what the Greeks believed about happiness, see *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2025).

<sup>30</sup> For more, see Caroline Alexander, *The War that Killed Achilles: The True Story of the Iliad* (Faber and Faber, 2010). Tim J. Young also explores Homer’s possible pacifist leanings in *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life* (see Chapter 12, “Must We? An Apparent Shift”).

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