

“Representations of Causation in the *Iliad*”

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How to contextualize Aristotle’s work on efficient causation? One might begin with Aristotle’s own list of his philosophical predecessors,¹ but many other ingredients mingled in the intellectual and cultural ferment of classical Athens. Indeed, a deep concern with issues related to efficient causation is apparent already in the *Iliad*, which in Aristotle’s day had long been seen as the foundation of Greek culture, and whose voice held unparalleled influence in the milieu that gave birth to philosophy. What constitutes an adequate account of a phenomenon’s causation? To what extent does human action reflect human rather than divine agency? To what extent is a human “agent” morally responsible for his actions? The *Iliad* never poses these questions formally, but nevertheless wrestles with them in fascinating ways. In this sense, it could well be read as part of the “pre-history” of what would, beginning with Aristotle, become the philosophical concept of efficient causation. I will here attempt a very brief sketch of such a reading.

The *Iliad* advertises its concern with causation from the opening lines. Rather than launching straight into a sequential narrative, Homer instead gives us two things: a vision of a disastrous event – Achaeans being slaughtered at Troy – and an invitation to consider that event’s causation from a variety of standpoints.

Sing, goddess, the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles –
the destructive wrath, which set countless woes on the Achaeans,
sent many noble souls of heroes to Hades,
made [the heroes] themselves feasts for dogs
and all birds – and the plan of Zeus was being accomplished. 5
[Sing] indeed from when the two first stood apart in strife –
Agamemnon, lord of men, and bright Achilles.
Which of the gods set them to quarreling?
Apollo; for he had become angry with [Agamemnon],
and sent a terrible plague through the army, and the people were 10
dying.
For Agamemnon had dishonored the priest Chryses.....²

- *Iliad* Book 1, 1-11

The first five of these lines evoke a vivid tableau in a well-known episode of the Trojan War: during the period of Achilles’ withdrawal from combat, numerous

¹ *Metaphysics*.3.

² Translations of the Greek are my own, undoubtedly influenced by those of Lattimore and others I have read and taught from. I have substituted familiar proper names for patronymics and periphrasis: “Agamemnon” for “the son of Atreus.”

Achaean warriors are being slain on the battlefield, their bodies left for carrion. What causes these deaths? Trojan warriors would be an obvious answer: it is the Trojans, after all, whose hands are driving the lethal bronze into Achaean bodies. It is remarkable, then, that the Trojans are not even mentioned in the passage, and won't be for some time. Achilles? But Achilles is *inactive*, of course – and that's just the point. The poet could hardly have begun "Sing, goddess, of Achilles, who slew Achaean heroes and left their bodies for dogs and birds," for that would conjure an image of Achilles run amok, slaughtering his own allies with sword and spear. No, it is Achilles' *anger* that slays them according to this account, his anger at a third party.

How to interpret this unusual description? One implication seems clear enough. Achilles' wrath finds expression in his decision not to fight. By spotlighting Achilles while omitting the Trojans, the poet here posits, and privileges, a perspective from which Achilles' refusal to act is more truly the cause of these deaths than the Trojans' violence: inaction more consequential than action, to the point that the action itself has become invisible in the description. We have bodies, souls fleeing, but no blows.

Yet the language itself intimates another, eerier perspective on the question of cause, for Achilles' anger does not *sound* as though it consists of inaction. Indeed, it is the subject of the verbs that evoke death and desecration in lines 2-4. Achilles' anger is directed at Agamemnon (as Homeric audiences know perfectly well), not the Achaeans. Yet from the Achaean perspective adopted in these lines, that anger has been made to seem malevolent, rather than indifferent, and even somehow extra-human: "... the wrath of Achilles... that sent many noble souls... to Hades... and left [their bodies]... for dogs and... birds." While Achilles looms behind the action, motionless, his emotion ranges murderous over the field.

The supernatural tenor to this description acquires new significance with the following hemistich: "... and the plan of Zeus was being accomplished." Along with the frozen Achilles, the invisible Trojans, and an eerily powerful emotion, we are told that Zeus is somehow behind this carnage. The connector "and" is vague, and compatible with various scenarios, including ones in which Zeus' plan either causes or is caused by Achilles' wrath.³ To take the first case: scholars argue that Archaic

³ The interpretation of the "plan" or "will" (as it is sometimes translated) of Zeus in this passage is an enormous and complicated issue. Engaging recent discussions include W. Allan "Performing the Will of Zeus: The Διὸς βουλή and the Scope of Early Greek Epic," in Reverman and Wilson, eds., *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin* (Oxford 2008), and J. S. Clay "The Will and the Whip of Zeus," in *Literary Imagination* 1: 40-60, 1999.

Greeks thought powerful emotions to originate outside a person, in the realm of spirits and gods.⁴ In the present instance, we might suppose that Zeus has *caused* Achilles' anger – perhaps as part of a larger plan to depopulate the earth.⁵ The wrath's agency, its status as killer, now crystallizes as a manifestation of Zeus' vicious intentions. Alternatively, “the plan of Zeus” might refer to Zeus' promise to bring honor to Achilles by ensuring that his withdrawal will entail Trojan victories – a promise made at Achilles' own request, following his quarrel with Agamemnon.⁶ Achilles' wrath in that case is the *cause* of Zeus' “plan.” Either reading anchors the wrath's power to kill in its relation to a particular kind of supernatural agency, Zeus, while creating very different impressions of Achilles' own culpability. More will be said about the human and divine motivations of the poem's action in a moment.

The proem contains one final reflection on the nature of causation. Having stated and described his theme, the wrath of Achilles, the poet announces with all apparent confidence a specific starting point for his account of it: “Sing, goddess, the wrath of... Achilles.... [Sing] indeed from when the two first stood apart in strife....” (1.1, 6) Achilles' anger at Agamemnon begins when they quarrel, which we now expect to hear recounted. But instead of proceeding to narrate from this “first” beginning, Homer perversely strikes out backward, in an apparently open-ended search for the quarrel's origins.

“Which of the gods set them to quarreling?” (1.8)

“Apollo, *for* he had become angry with [Agamemnon]....” (1.9)...

“*For* Agamemnon had dishonored” the priest.... (1.12)

With each step, the poet picks his way backward along a tenuous causal chain. Only then does the narrative begin in earnest, describing Agamemnon's harsh treatment of Chryses and working forward. The wrath starts, once more, with Agamemnon, but now the starting point has been made to seem arbitrary. Why not track further? By eschewing sequential narrative in favor of this backward movement, the poet elaborates his own decision-making as a narrator, thereby offering not simply an account of Achilles' wrath, but an inquiry into what constitutes a beginning. Is there not some god behind Agamemnon's actions? That is precisely what Agamemnon himself claims – about his harsh words to Achilles, at any rate – much later, as Achilles formally ends their quarrel. “I am not *aitios*, but rather Zeus, and Moira, and

⁴ E. R. Dodds *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951) is a classic well worth reading.

⁵ Mentioned in the *Cypria*, a later poem apparently based in some fashion on earlier material.

⁶ *Iliad* Book 1.

a mist-haunting Erinys [are *aitioi*], who put wild folly in my wits...”⁷ Zeus again? Perhaps, but Agamemnon has every reason to point his finger at the gods at this moment. In this reading of the “pre-history” of a concept, it may be worth noting that Agamemnon here uses the adjectival form of *aitia*, which Aristotle will later appropriate to develop his theory of causation.

Is Agamemnon *aitios* or not? Is Achilles? The Greek world was full of gods, and the relationship between divine and human causation in Homer is a vexed question. A strange double vision permeates much of the poem. From one perspective, Achilles is the slayer of Hector: “Bright Achilles rushed at Hector and struck him [in the throat] with his spear” (22.326). The wound is fatal, and Achilles seems to have caused his death. Yet Zeus, moments earlier, asks the other gods: “...shall we slay [Hector] now... at the hands of Achilles (22.175-76)?” From Zeus’ perspective, Achilles is the *means* through which the gods slay Hector.

Some critics have seen the gods as mere poetic dressing for an essentially human drama. Thus, when Athena stops Achilles from killing Agamemnon in Book 1, this is a *façon de parler* – the poet’s way of saying that Achilles’ better judgment held him back. Others critics take the opposite view, and find in Homer a belief that all human impulses have a divine origin.⁸ A middle approach theorizes that Homer thinks that human actions may have both a divine and a human motivation, which are two sides of a coin, and there is much good evidence for this position.⁹ But the poem seems to me to do more than present a particular conception or conceptions of causation. It also attempts to come to terms with the paradoxes they entail, and the ethical consequences of taking a particular line in a given situation. Who is responsible for the death of Patroclus, killed during Achilles’ withdrawal from battle? “Hector ... struck [Patroclus] with his spear / in the lowest part of his flank – and he drove the bronze right through” (16.820-1). So dies Patroclus. But in dying mockery he calls Hector only his “third killer,” placing him after Zeus, Apollo, and fate on the one hand, and the Trojan Euphorbus who wounded him first on the other. If we have not forgotten the proem by now, we should perhaps push Hector even further back to

⁷ *Iliad*.19.86-88. Achilles, formally setting aside his anger, will publicly accept Agamemnon’s account, and adds that Zeus apparently wanted many Achaeans to die (*Iliad*.19.268-274).

⁸ A succinct, recent discussion of these issues can be found in the final chapter of J. M. Redfield *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Durham 1994; 1st printing 1975).

⁹ A. Lesky *Göttliche und menschliche Motivation im homerischen Epos* (Heidelberg 1961).

fourth place, after Achilles and his wrath at Agamemnon. And behind the wrath is Zeus again, and Apollo again, and Agamemnon....