

The humans in the *Iliad* have inherent characteristics that provide the driving force behind their actions: the gods simply act in concert with them, allowing the human beings to exercise free will of their own.

- Throughout the text, the gods are portrayed with all the flaws and eccentricities of mortals.
- This human-like behavior isn't restricted to Zeus and Hera.
- Because the gods are so similar to the mortals, one can make the argument that they exist simply to explain different facets of human nature: therefore, they have an influence on the human heroes, not because they are all-powerful deities, but because they represent personality traits already inherent in each individual person.
- The argument that the gods are facets of human nature is also evident in smaller characters.
- The previous examples indicate that the actions of the heroes in the *Iliad* are actions of free will, rather than decisions made because of divine intervention.

Throughout the *Iliad*, Zeus and the rest of the Olympians are presented as remarkably human in almost every way. In fact, the only obvious difference between the deities and the human characters is that the gods are immortal. In this paper, I will give examples of the humanity of these gods, and argue that they are created this way in order to explain human behavior. Ultimately, the humans in the *Iliad* have inherent characteristics that provide the driving force behind their actions: the gods simply act in concert with them, allowing the human beings to exercise free will of their own.

Throughout the text, the gods are portrayed with all the flaws and eccentricities of mortals. The one thing that sets them apart is that they have to deal with each other for eternity. They are acutely aware of this – at the beginning of the *Iliad*, Hephaestus urges Hera and Zeus to forgo their argument about the Greeks, since “they’ll be no more pleasure at our feasts if we let things turn ugly” (*Iliad* 1, 608-609). Having to bear each other’s presence forever seems to be a good incentive to keep the peace. And yet, peaceful is hardly the word to describe the relationship between the gods, perhaps because their immortality, in nearly every instance, is countered by their great humanity. In one memorable scene, Hera flies into one of her customary rages and accuses the son of Kronos of “devising secret plots behind my back...you can’t bear to tell me what you’re thinking, or you don’t dare” (*Iliad* 1, 573-576). Zeus replies that his plans are none of her business, and angrily bids her to keep her silence. At this point, it is clear to the reader that Zeus and Hera are hardly divine symbols of peace and equanimity. Just like mortals such as Agamemnon and Achilles view each other with suspicion and intolerance, the gods experience identical emotions of wariness, anger, and irritation.

This human-like behavior isn't restricted to Zeus and Hera. Later in the text, Helen infuriates Aphrodite by refusing to share Paris's bed (Iliad 3, 438-439). This is understandable, given that Helen is already in a delicate position with the other Trojan women. What is surprising is Aphrodite's furious response, in which she warns Helen not to "vex me, bitch, or I may let go of you and hate you as extravagantly as I love you now" (Iliad 3, 442-443). If one looks at Aphrodite as a divine entity, her reaction may not make sense, but when it is viewed as a manifestation of human emotion, it becomes almost reasonable. Her angry response to Helen is no doubt spurred by her affection for Paris, whom she has long favored. By ensuring that he gets his woman for another night, she is playing into her own sense of vanity. Hera's jealousy and Aphrodite's ego don't stand alone as examples of this divine humanity. It is also manifested through positive human emotions such as forgiveness. Although it takes some convincing from Hephaestus, Hera swiftly forgives Zeus for his secret scheming, and is soon merrily feasting with the other gods (Iliad 1, 627-628). All these instances bring up the question of why the gods are represented this way in the first place, when it may have been simpler to portray them as divine entities incapable of human transgressions. However, it is likely that the deities are being presented in this unique way to help explain human behavior – more specifically, the behavior of the humans in the *Iliad* itself.

Because the gods are so similar to the mortals, one can make the argument that they exist simply to explain different facets of human nature: therefore, they have an influence on the human heroes, not because they are all-powerful deities, but because they represent personality traits already inherent in each individual person. Throughout the text, major characters seem to be at constant

battle with their different emotions. This inner conflict is mirrored by the everyday conflicts between the gods. Just as Zeus and Hera are constantly at odds with one another, so are the different aspects of Achilles: those of cultural responsibility, pride, honor, and revenge. No one is completely at peace with his or her conflicting emotions in the Iliad – and therefore, neither are the gods, who represent these emotions. Hector is a prime example of a human figure who finds himself torn between two forces: his love for his growing family, and his duty as a prince of Troy. He admits to Andromache that he worries about his own mortality, but emphasizes that “my shame...would be too terrible if I hung back from battle like a coward.... I have learned to be one of the best, to fight in Troy’s first ranks, defending my father’s honor and my own” (Iliad 6, 463-469). These traits– a deeply ingrained sense of honor, a loyalty to home - are clearly established in the beginning of the text. Therefore, when Zeus later grants Hector “strength to kill and keep killing” (Iliad 11, 208), it is not too much of a stretch to attribute Hector’s dogged perseverance to his upbringing and rigid sense of duty, rather than to the intervention of Zeus himself. Cultural upbringing also lays the foundation for Achilles’s future decisions. When in the middle of a bitter argument with Agamemnon, for instance, he briefly debates gutting the king with his sword (Iliad 1, 199-201). Homer proceeds to describe Athena’s intervention: “Athena...sent by the white-armed goddess Hera...stood behind Achilles and grabbed his sandy hair” (Iliad 1, 205-207). This passage indicates that Athena is solely responsible for preventing Achilles from this violent act. However, the fact remains that Achilles would probably have controlled his temper despite Athena. He is, after all, the son of a king; his awareness of the social hierarchy of eighth-

century Greece would be enough to prevent him from raising a sword against Agamemnon.

The argument that the gods are facets of human nature is also evident in smaller characters. In one instance early on, Zeus “sends” a dream to Agamemnon, encouraging him to attack Troy immediately (Iliad 2, 12-16). Zeus ostensibly encourages this foolish decision so that he can fulfill his promise to Thetis and give the Trojans the upper hand. Yet, as can be seen when he fights Achilles over Briseis in the beginning of the text, Agamemnon is established early on as an arrogant, selfish man. It therefore makes sense that, in his arrogance, he believes he can confront the Trojans without the help of Achilles. Ultimately, Zeus isn’t controlling Agamemnon’s decision – he is acting in concert with Agamemnon’s inherent character traits. This trend is continued with Patroclus’s determination to jump into the heat of battle, despite Apollo’s warnings. Apollo urges him to retreat, but it has already been established that the young warrior has an impetuous streak. This can be seen when he begs Achilles to allow him to fight, “like a child begging for a toy” (Iliad 16, 50). He chooses to put himself in danger, and Apollo’s “voice” is simply the voice of reason in his head, meant to counter the impulsive part of Patroclus’s nature.

The previous examples indicate that the actions of the heroes in the *Iliad* are actions of free will, rather than decisions made because of divine intervention. The fact that characters like Hector are acting of their own accord gives their actions all the more weight. Hector seems even more heroic when it becomes clear that his choices are his own: his description as “great Hector, son of Priam, in his shining helmet” (Iliad 2, 933-934) is now truly well-deserved. Furthermore, characters such as Paris and Agamemnon stand out as excessively

foolish and misguided, because their actions can be attributed to character flaws, rather than the gods. Ultimately, the *Iliad* serves to glorify human identity and human choice.

Despite all the evidence in favor of my arguments, obvious objections can be made. One is why, if so many decisions are made through personal choice and free will, the characters blame the gods for the great losses sustained during battle. Priam, for example, assures Helen that she is “not to blame for this war with the Greeks. The gods are” (*Iliad* 3, 173). Yet, if the gods are simply acting in concert with a human’s inherent characteristics, why blame them in the first place? The answer is simple: it is easier for mortals to blame a higher power for unfortunate events than to take responsibility for themselves. For Priam, shoving the blame on the gods may look better than admitting that Paris and Helen’s actions had disastrous consequences. It is also curious that there is so much conflict between each of the gods, when the gods are supposedly acting in concert with a human’s inherent traits. For example, Zeus and Apollo take opposite sides when Patroclus enters the battle. Yet, it is important to note that humans in the *Iliad* are going through inner turmoil themselves and are therefore constantly battling contrary emotions, making it logical that the gods would take opposite sides.

Ultimately, the gods in the *Iliad* argue, forgive, and reason much like the mortals in the story; they therefore function to help explain human behavior. Although these deities, in the literal sense, seem to control the fates of the mortals, it is clear that each Greek warrior is actually an agent of free will. These humans have intrinsic traits, stemming from their cultural awareness and past

experiences, that shape the way they act and behave. The gods simply exist to catalyze that process.

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