



Research on Fate, Gods, and Mortals in the *Iliad*

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Abstract

The concept of fate, as known to many, precludes the knowledge of events as they are destined to occur. Many people, including characters in the *Iliad*, demonstrate their understanding that fate is inevitable. This idea is supported by Homer, who, through various characters and their interactions with immortals, asserts the supremacy of fate over the free will of human beings. Intriguingly, there exists a contrast in how gods perceive and interact with fate. Homer demonstrates that gods not only perceive and understand fate differently, but they also have the power to alter it. Different scholars have debated the meaning of this discrepancy and its implications for free will. The fact that gods can alter fate suggests that free will may be irrelevant. Homer exemplifies each instance of this debate, such as when human beings exercise free will, when they show their acceptance of fate, and when they affirm their knowledge of the impending events of fate. Importantly, scholars have sought to question the absurdity of the events depicted in the book, where human beings are portrayed as having knowledge of fate, as seen in the story of Achilles. Deductively, the Homeric worldview, although riddled with slight contradictions, appears to be helpful for readers seeking to comprehend and resolve the intractability of fate.

Keywords

Homeric interpretation of fate, Inevitability vs. free will, Gods' perception and influence on fate, Scholarly debates on fate in the *Iliad*, Human acceptance and knowledge of fate

1. Research background

The *Iliad* is an epic poem in which Homer pits human beings against each other in a constant state of war, one that also involves the gods. As a guide for contemporary morals, especially of the horrors and hostility of war, the *Iliad* has been an integral part of classical literature that comments on the historical inevitability of war and the nature of individual actions within wars (Schein, S. L., 2022). This epic explores numerous themes, with one outstanding element being that life is not fair—as evidenced by the immortals' actions towards mortals. In line with this theme, the discussion of fate and its role in the relationship between mortals and gods remains central to most interactions within the poem. These relationships are riddled with paradoxes, suggesting on the one hand that the world is bound by fate, but also suggesting it can be altered by actions of individual mortals or divinities. Seeing as fate is predetermined, the idea of individual action that can change is a contradiction. Such notions inform the reader of the extent the epic expounds on the Homeric perspective of free will, predetermination, and the nature of divinity. Indeed, it is affirmed that, while free will exists, and while divine actions are sometimes influenced by mortals, fate remains a constant in relationships between the gods and the mortals.

2. Exploring Paradoxes: Fate, Gods, and Mortals

A series of intriguing connections and contradictions juxtaposes fate and the relationship between gods and mortals.

This disconnect derives, fundamentally, from evidence of mortal awareness of fate and the subsequent actions or inactions of both gods and mortals in response to this knowledge. To prompt inquiry into mortal awareness of fate, different instances within the narrative depict the various situations where the audience is informed of the prior knowledge of fate among gods in their relationship with mortals. To this end, the two mortals central to the narrative arc of the *Iliad*, Hector, and Achilles, by their actions raise a question of whether mortals are privy to the commanding nature of fate as a force controlling everything.

Inevitability permeates the atmosphere of the *Iliad*. Indeed, it is imperative to note that reducing fate to a fixed outcome is likely to produce a cynical outlook towards life, and Cyniscus, a character in Lucian's satirical work *Zeus Catechized*, embodies this perspective. However, what happens when both gods and mortals are aware of a particular fate? In Book 22, the narrator focuses on Zeus's perspective as he weighs the fate of Hector:

καὶ τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατὴρ ἐτίθειε τάλαντα,
 ἐν δ' κῆρε τανηλεγέος θανάτοιο
 τὴν μὲν Ἀχιλλῆος, τὴν δ' Ἑκτορος ἵπποδάμοιο
 ἔλκε δὲ μέσσα λαβῶν: ῥέπε δ' Ἑκτορος αἴσιμον ἦμαρ
 ὄχετο δ' εἰς Αἴδαο, λίπεν δὲ ἐ Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
 Then the Father balanced his golden scales, and in them
 he set two fateful portions of death, which lays men prostrate,
 one for Achilleus, and one for Hektor, breaker of horses
 and balanced it by the middle; and Hektor's death-day was heavier
 and dragged downward toward death, and Phoibos Apollo forsook him. (Il. 22.209-213)

As Morrison (1997, 274) notes, explaining this example of such “death-weighing” or *kerostasia*¹, Zeus' act of balancing the golden scales is an affirmation that certain actions are predestined, and that no divine action can alter fate. Conversely, the epic presents the mortal Hector as being cognizant of both the existence and the inevitability of fate. For example, in *Iliad* 6 he says to Andromache “εὖ γὰρ ἐγὼ τόδε οἶδα κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν: ἔσσειται ἦμαρ ὄτ' ἄν ποτ' ὀλώλη Ἴλιος ἱρή” (For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it: there will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish, *Il.* 6.447-48). This line demonstrates acceptance on the part of Hector of things that are to come. He further cements his belief when he addresses Andromache later in that same scene:

δαιμονίη μὴ μοί τι λῆν ἀκαχίζεο θυμῷ:
 οὐ γάρ τις μ' ὑπὲρ αἴσαν ἀνὴρ Ἄϊδι προΐαψει:
 μοῖραν οὐ τινά φημι πεφυγμένον ἔμμεναι ἀνδρῶν,
 οὐ κακὸν οὐδὲ μὲν ἐσθλόν, ἐπὴν τὰ πρῶτα γένηται
 Poor Andromache! Why does your heart sorrow so much for me?
 No man is going to hurl me to Hades, unless it is fated;
 but as for fate, I think that no man yet has escaped it,
 once it has taken its first form, neither brave man nor coward. (Il. 6. 486-89)

In this instance, Hector appears convinced of his impending doom, yet acknowledges he is unaware of the actual arrangement of events. He employs a negative imperative, μὴ...ἀκαχίζεο, imploring Andromache to not waste any sympathy on the fact that Hector's life is fated to end. Such conviction on the part of Hector is sufficient confirmation of an acceptance of the unchanging nature of fate once it is determined. Despite his conviction, Hector still registers a lack of information regarding his fate. The case is similar for gods, seeing as instances of death weighing, for both the Trojans against Achaians and Hector against Achilles, suggest that a god might not ultimately know or determine any given outcome—even though Zeus appears to have the ability to know and even alter fate, such as when he wants to change the outcome of the duel between Achilles and Hector (Il. 22). Notably, the clear exclusion of mortals from the determination of their fate is what Hector recognizes, and he chooses not to avoid fighting but instead go face his fate.

The Golden Scales of Fate pitted Achilles against Hector, adding another layer of paradox extant in the *Iliad*.

¹ The first instance of the *kerostasia* emerges when Zeus balances the fate of the Trojans against the Achaians in *Iliad* 8 Lines 69-71. The importance of this death-weighing is to inform Zeus of the predetermined fate, something that suggests the lack of knowledge of ultimate events on the part of the gods. This notion contrasts with the assumption that gods know everything as depicted in previous aspects of the book such as when he understands that Troy is fated to fall.

Contrary to Hector, Achilles is not accepting of the inevitability of fate and instead he develops a feeling of impotence propelled by his helplessness against the deterministic system that is fate. This complexifies our sense of the relationship between morals and gods on the issue of fate. Firstly, *Iliad* 1.201-214 depicts Athena restraining Achilles from killing Agamemnon, which illustrates that the gods have control over the actions of mortals. Indeed, Albin Lesky (2001, p. 170) notes that several passages within the Homeric poems show instances where the actions of men have been motivated by the intervention of the deity. For example, in Book 2, Zeus prompts Agamemnon to action by sending him a dream as affirmed in line 6 where it is noted δέ οἱ κατὰ θυμὸν ἀρίστη φαίνεται βουλή, πέμψαι ἐπ' Ἀτρεΐδῃ Ἀγαμέμνονι οὐλον ὄνειρον (Now to his mind this thing appeared to be the best counsel, to send evil Dream to Atreus' son Agamemnon, II.2.5-6). On the basis of this evidence, it is clear that some influence, like Athena's forceful restraint of Achilles in *Iliad* 1, demonstrates that human beings have free will, which the gods must actively countermand when it runs contrary to fate. This goes on to ascertain that some actions by mortals are often influenced by gods as opposed to the free will of the individuals.

In widening the discussion on the free will of individuals as is present in human beings being able to choose what they want with their lives; Book 9 depicts the exercise of this free will with the instance where Achilles is in the know of a double destiny chooses for himself the destiny, he so desires. As Achilles relates:

μήτηρ γάρ τέ μέ φησι θεὰ Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα,
 διχθαδίας κῆρας φερέμεν θανάτοιο τέλοσδε,
 εἰ μὲν κ' αὖθι μένωνρώων πόλιν ἀμφιμάχωμαι,
 ὄλετο μὲν μοι νόστος, ἀτὰρ κλέος ἄφθιτον ἔσται:
 εἰ δέ κεν οἴκαδ' ἴκωμι φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
 ὄλετό μοι κλέος ἐσθλόν, ἐπὶ δῆρὸν δέ μοι αἰὼν
 For my mother Thetis the goddess of the silver feet tells me,
 I carry two sorts of destiny toward the day of my death.
 Either, if I stay here and fight beside the city of the Trojans,
 my return home is gone, but my glory shall be everlasting;
 but if I return home to the beloved land of my fathers,
 the excellence of my glory is gone, but there will be a long-life (II.9. 410-15).

From the above excerpt one notes that, unlike Hector before him, Achilles is aware of what will happen if he takes certain actions or omissions. In a figurative sense, Homer depicts Achilles as both a player as well as a pawn. Book 22 cements him in the latter role when the golden scales put Achilles on the other balancing end. As such, it is seen that while human beings can have access to knowledge of their predetermined destiny, they have no control over the same. In Book 9, Achilles is approached by messengers from Agamemnon who is offering gifts in plenty if Achilles agrees to fight for his army against the Achaians and slays Hector. In an answer to Agamemnon, Achilles captures his understanding of double destiny when he says

ἴση μοῖρα μένοντι καὶ εἰ μάλα τις πολεμίζοι:
 ἐν δὲ ἰῆ τιμῆ ἡμὲν κακὸς ἠδὲ καὶ ἐσθλός:
 κάτθαν' ὁμῶς ὃ τ' ἀεργὸς ἀνήρ ὃ τε πολλὰ ἐοργός
 Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard.
 We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings.
 A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much (II.9 318-320)

This conversation, from 100 lines before Achilles' disclosure of his double destiny is essential because it contrasts clearly with what Hector believes in his destiny. The message Achilles sets out is that, regardless of a man's efforts, their ultimate fate is written down and that is to die. It is for this reason, coupled with the fact that Agamemnon was not truthful and had not honored Achilles in the past, that Achilles then decides that he will not fight as Agamemnon wanted but instead return back to his home. The refusal by Achilles here sets the stage for an important turning point to come later, in Book 16.

Following Achilles' refusal, Patroclus, Achilles' closest companion, persuades him to let him wear his armor and go into battle in his place. When Hector kills Patroclus (II.16. 818-821), his death seals the discussion of the predetermined fate overpowering individual will. The events that depict fate being above freewill include, firstly, that Patroclus body is carried over by the Trojans and then, in Book 18, Achilles receives word about the death of his

friend, which sends him into a cloud of sorrow as he mourns his dear friend (Il. 18. 22-26). This death spurs in him anger and causes him to rethink his original decision not to fight. Instead, it motivated in him a desire to win excellent glory (Il.18.121). Indeed, as he goes to war in Book 19 and secures victory, he affirms that, while human beings may be willing to do as they please, some things that happen in life cannot be controlled by human beings. Therefore, this is a confirmation that mortals have the ability to make choices and that they also believe that their choices matter to some extent. However, from the events, there is objective confirmation from the foregoing evidence that these choices do not matter since the occurrence of events as fate has willed changes the actions of individuals from what they had already decided by dint of their free will. As a result, the Homeric perspective of free will appears at this stage to be that Gods, to some extent, have the capability to alter fate.

The contradictions depicted in the *Iliad* arise from the variation present in the characters' understanding and reasoning with regard to fate. Indeed, each character, be it a mortal or a god, is shown as having an individual perspective of fate informed by varying degrees of knowledge and rationality, and each interprets and responds to fate differently (Burks, Jonathan, 2020)². To exemplify this variation in individual perspective, the different characters explored above portray different interpretations of fate. As a result, different attitudes and actions are generated over time as each character seeks to understand the events as per their interpretations. In some sense, this varied interpretation generates an acknowledgement on the part of the characters and narrator that they are part of a narrative, verging on metafiction³. Morrison notes that the *Iliad* is presented in three perspectives: the divine level, the poetic level, and the mortal level, with the poet oscillating between a monolithic perspective of an undisputed destiny, on the one hand, and suppressing the openness and unpredictability of fate on the other.⁴ A constant, however, in the *Iliad*'s presentation is the perspective of the narrator, which is all-knowing and which is presented to the audience in the form of one, consistent "world-view", as Morrison avers. Hence, fate is depicted as a meta-fiction that excludes other potential outcomes which could arise from the gods' or mortal's knowledge of events.

3. Divine Conundrum: The Dichotomy of the Gods

The definitive position of human beings contrasts extensively when it comes to the position of gods within the question of life. Within the cosmic intersection of the different characters in the *Iliad*, gods shift between being mere spectators and being masters of fate, such as when Zeus expresses frustrations, hidden in compassion, when sympathizing for Hector, in *Iliad* book 22, and Sarpedon, in book 16. Both instances highlight these shifts, when Zeus seeks to have a say in determining the fate of the two characters only to be stopped in his quest by Athene and Hera, respectively. In the case of Sarpedon, Zeus acknowledges that it is destined that Sarpedon should fall at the hands of *Patroklos* son of *Menoitios*. Zeus faces significant distress as Homer presents by stating:

διχθὰ δέ μοι κραδίη μέμονε φρεσὶν ὀρμαίνοντι
 ἢ μιν ζῶν ἐόντα μάχης ἄπο δακρυόεσσης
 θεῖω ἀναπάξας Λυκίης ἐν πίονι δήμῳ
 ἢ ἤδη ὑπὸ χερσὶ Μενoitιάδαο δαμάσσω
 The heart in my breast is balanced between two ways as I ponder,
 whether I should snatch him out of the sorrowful battle
 and set him down still alive in the rich country of Lykia,
 or beat him under at the hands of the son of Menoitios. (Il.16.435-38).

One should also note that Zeus' use of the word διχθὰ (between two ways) directly recalls the closely related term that Achilles uses to describe his "two sorts of destiny" (διχθαδίας κῆρας, Il. 9.411). Hence the decision faced by Achilles is the same one that Zeus is struggling with. However, this proposition is opposed by other gods, specifically Hera who warns:

² Burks, Jonathan (2020) affirms that. Indeed, each character, be it a mortal or a god, is shown as having an individual perspective of fate informed by varying degrees of knowledge and rationality, and each interprets and responds to fate differently

³ Morrison (1997, 282) acknowledges metafiction as a work of fiction where the characters, author, or narrator are aware that they are part of a fictional work.

⁴ Morrison (1997, 286) notes that the "The analogous polarities at these three levels mutually reinforce one another, allowing one to conclude with some confidence that this alternation is a deliberate effect of the storytelling technique of the *Iliad*'s poet." Notably, this is despite Morrison noting that each of these perspectives contradicts the other. Indeed, the metafiction arises in the sense that this tension between contradictory movements is also evident at the divine level and at the poetic level. The gods contemplate acting against what had appeared to be unavoidable, and the poet suggests episodes which would violate the epic tradition.

αἶ κε ζῶν πέμψης Σαρπηδόνα ὄνδε δόμονδε,
 φράζεο μὴ τι ἔπειτα θεῶν ἐθέλῃσι καὶ ἄλλος/
 πέμπειν ὄν φίλον υἱὸν ἀπὸ κρατερῆς ὑσμίνης
 if you bring Sarpedon back to his home,
 still living, think how then some other one of the gods
 might also wish to carry his own son out of the strong encounter; (Il. 16. 445-47).

The finding here is that the gods desire to be active masters of fate but are prevented from asserting control due to the implied chaos that might result if they took an active role in the determination.

Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that human beings accept the action of Gods over fate as Slaska-Sapala (2012 p58) notes of the query “Which one of the gods was it that brought them together in strife? (III.1.8).” This indicates an actual acceptance among men of the role of gods in fate alignment. The same perception is sustained by Yoong (2015, p. 76) who agrees that such instances of divine defined role in fate contrasted by their consistent desire to control in other areas of the epic contributes to the conundrum. In contrast, Ashlock (2023, p18) identifies that this could be a perspective sustained by Homer seeking to advance a dramatic effect in the audience who are entertained by these conflicts. Even so, we cannot really underestimate the active role that gods appear to have over fate (Manous-sakis, 2007, 56). As argued by Lasine (202, 115) this undefined role has the effect of pushing in gods the desire to be active masters.

This desire to be active masters was also witnessed in the case of Hector in book 22 line 169-70, whom Zeus observes being pursued by Achilles. The audience is made aware that Hector has found favor in Zeus’ eyes when he acknowledges ἐμὸν δ’ ὀλοφύρεται ἦτορ/ Ἔκτορος, ὅς μοι πολλὰ βοῶν ἐπὶ μηρί’ ἔκηεν (my heart is mourning for Hektor who has burned in my honour many thigh pieces of oxen. Il. 169-70). It is for this reason, therefore, that Zeus implores the gods ἀλλ’ ἄγετε φράζεσθε θεοὶ καὶ μητιάσθε, ἡέ μιν ἐκ θανάτοιο σώσομεν, ἡέ μιν ἤδη, Πηλεΐδῃ Ἀχιλῆϊ δαμάσσομεν ἐσθλὸν ἐόντα (Come then, you immortals, take thought and take counsel, whether to rescue this man or whether to make him, for all his valour go down under the hands of Achilles, the son of Peleus. Il. 174-76). Like Hera in the case of Sarpedon, Athene also challenges such an action by Zeus in words almost identical to those used by Hera and affirms that other gods shall not approve of any action to remove a mortal man from a predetermined fate (Holden, 2023). From the foregoing, one notes awareness on the part of gods of their ability to influence fate, and the temptation to use that ability to bring about their preferred outcomes, but they ultimately do not support action.

While the predetermined nature of fate remains undeniable, a conundrum arises in two ways. Firstly, Zeus seems convinced in both instances of having the ability to affect fate. This perspective is shared by the two goddesses, who seem perturbed by Zeus’s intention to alter fate. From this position, a second aspect of the dichotomy of gods arises, that is, whether the role of gods should be limited to being spectators in the occurrence of predetermined destiny. Nevertheless, the enigmatic relationship between gods, fate, and mortals has not been emphasized in the epic more than when Zeus believed he could alter fate.

The Second Sophistic author Lucian, writing many centuries later, provides us with a critique of this conundrum by first suggesting its absurdity and contradictory nature it. In *Zeus Catechized*, Cyniscus states “Be chary of your threats, Zeus Be chary of your threats, Zeus, for you know that nothing can happen to me which Fate has not decreed before you. I see that even the temple-robbers I mentioned are not punished, but most of them escape you; it was not fated, I suppose, that they should be caught.” (A.S. Owen, 1937) This response by Cyniscus is an acknowledgement of gods as having no power to violate fate in any way. He posits that “clinging to an unyielding concept as fate as a deterministic authority is not only absurd but equally futile” (Kilburn & MacLeod, 1960). Lucian’s point is that there is no deterministic aspect to fate, particularly since this fate, albeit deterministic and inviolable by gods, is also not applicable to gods seeing as it cannot take their lives.

From the preceding paragraph, it is important to realize that, despite the assertion that gods could alter a predetermined destiny, the *Iliad* continues to illustrate the inherent human nature to assert agency even in the face of an inevitable fate (Horn, 2020). An even further explanation of the conundrum is Cedric Whitman’s perspective of what fate within the *Iliad* means. Whitman (1958, p. 228) reasserts the superiority of gods with respect to fate by averring that the absolute nature of gods allows them an understanding of things within mortals’ lives even before they happen. Thus, Whitman counters the supposition that “fate” within the *Iliad* implies predestination, as accepting this supposition would then render any suggestion that something different could happen as absurd. It is precisely this fore-knowledge that allows gods such as Zeus to speak of a possible alteration of fate with words such as “contrary to fate” within the *Iliad*. The dichotomy thus emerges in the sense that gods are either in control of fate or are enslaved to

fate.

4. The Power of Irrationality: Achilles, Hector, and Zeus

The picture of fate within Homer's *Iliad* is derived from depictions of characters' emotional, rather than logical, responses to the inevitability of fate. Although several characters show emotional responses to the inevitability of fate, three characters stand out with their irrational aspects including Achilles for his wrath, Hector for his fear, as well as Zeus for his sympathy (Matury, 2022). These are all irrational, though readily comprehensible, responses deriving from the incessant struggle of the characters against the limit of their control as well as from their understanding of predestination. The irrationality is emphasized in mortals whose actions are confined by divine law (Themis) and human law (nomos)⁵ hence such characters as Hector and Achilles are featured more prominently the conflict between fate and free will is highlighted. However, it should be noted that such depiction should not be a downplaying of the role of individuals in their irrationality.

Lesky (2001, 173) interprets Achilles' most wrathful actions, such as refusing to grant quarter to Lycaon (*Iliad* 19.318) and dishonoring Hector's corpse (*Iliad* 22.241), as motivated by his own, individual will and not the influence of the gods. The power of irrationality is affirmed when, as Lesky observes, it compels individuals to act in ways a reasonable man would act—especially one who understands the inevitability of fate. In the case of Achilles, who was still the victim of irrationality despite understanding the deterministic nature of his destiny, Lesky observes that he “has knowledge and yet can do no otherwise than as his rage compels him”, —or in other words, that human beings have no control over fate. (Lesky A., 2001)

Hector equally demonstrates the same effect of fate through his irrationality. Long (2007, p. 122), in discussing morals and values within Homer's *Iliad* (6.441-443), notes fear on the part of Hector, limiting him from showing cowardice by refusing to fight for the Trojans since he has always fought for this army. While this is one example of Hector's rational fear, the irrationality of fear only appears when Hector runs from the duel that he is to have with Achilles, seeking to prolong his life despite clear awareness of his impending fate. In contrast, his acceptance of that fate, when he finally realizes that the gods have abandoned him, is a clear depiction of rationality. Indeed, the debate in Zeus' mind on whether he should save Hector was motivated by Zeus' irrational sympathy for the pious Hector being under pursuit from Achilles, under whose feet many men had fallen (and others more would fall yet). That debate culminates in the Golden Scales moment, where Zeus lets fate take its course and Hector realizes that the gods have forsaken him, leaving his life to follow the course already established by destiny. In this case, Hector's acceptance of his fate as something he has no control over stems from a belief that all actions are subject to fate and that individuals should simply face life as it comes because of their limited control over it.

Zeus' moments of irrationality bring the reader into a discussion of the “will of Zeus” (Διὸς ... βουλή) established in Book 1 (Il.1.5) that appears as a plan that wills the massive loss of human lives, both Achaeans and Trojans. Notably, this does not stand out explicitly but flows from his actions thus pitting reason against passion. Even as Zeus has been presented as rational within the *Iliad*, such as his resort to use the Golden Scales when his emotions are clouded by bias, at least twice his emotions become clouded with bias and he seeks to alter the dictates of fate. Irrationality, manifested as his passion for a particular mortal (or two particular mortals), brings him to the edge of manipulating fate were it not for the voice of reason from the goddesses. At least as much as the mortals, gods are affected with passion, evidenced by Zeus' willingness to disrupt the course of destiny for the benefit of mortals who had pleased them. Even so, Zeus returns to rationality mainly through the use of the scales a standard measurement tool that limits the bias he may possess. Pietro Pucci (2017, p. 201), analyzing Hector's death in Book 22, agrees with the preceding statement and argues that the human piety that leads humans to believe that gods act as ethical human beings is a blind assumption. The blind assumption arises because Zeus, both an initiator and a guarantor of the order of things, only follows the principles that he himself, as Zeus, believes. (Pucci P., 2017) However, while passion is critical in determining most aspects of life as we see it or as we know it, evidence is present that it is of no consequence when it comes to fate since, despite having the power to alter destiny, the gods take a step back from influencing the outcomes.

⁵ Lesky, A. (2001, 176). Divine and human causation in Homeric epic. Cairns, DL, 170-202. This can be seen where Lesky notes that divinity intervenes in human deliberations sometimes and often brings about a decision in p.176. This is in reference to when Athena turns the heart of Odysseus and brings about a decision (*Il.*6-674).

5. Deepening Connections: Fate, Gods, and Mortals

An investigation of the paradoxes and contradictions shows that relationships between fate, gods, and mortals in *The Iliad* are not superficial. Instead, they entail a dynamic interplay of dependencies and influences, with each element and character affecting and being affected by others. Importantly, the question therefore, is, whether divine entities within the epic are detached observers or active masters of fate. The balance of evidence suggests that they are engaged with the lives of the mortals and their fates, often influencing events and being influenced themselves.

The motif of interconnectedness and mutual influences permeates the epic and underscores the multifaceted relationship between divine will, fate, and human agency. The epic illustrates this interconnectedness through characters who do not resolve themselves to fate but instead seek incessantly to push against the definitive boundaries established by the gods and fate. The instances include, Firstly Achilles' double destiny and his push for agency, such as when he refuses to heed to Agamemnon's request for him to fight against the Trojans, as noted above, in the desire to determine how he will die. Secondly, Hector's delusional hope in his supposed ability to negotiate his fate when, despite previously demonstrating an understanding of his predetermined nature to die, he still evades Achilles in their final battle. The irrationality of this act is seen in Book 22 Ἑκτορα δ', ὡς ἐνόησεν, ἔλε τρόμος: οὐδ' ἄρ' ἔτ' ἔτλη, αἴθι μένειν, ὀπίσω δὲ πύλας λίπε, βῆ δὲ φοβηθείς: (And the shivers took hold of Hektor when he saw him, and he could no longer stand his ground there, but left the gates behind, and fled, frightened, II.22.136-138).

These two examples from Achilles' and Hector's arcs perfectly encapsulate the human agency side of the equation. It is critical to note that a pattern exists within the epic, in that Homer not only exploits the interplay of the different interactions as basic considerations (Willcock, 1964, p. 142), but makes this interplay the basis for understanding humanity's constant struggles and aspirations amidst already determined forces, subject to divine whims.

6. Conclusion

Fate in the Homeric perspective is certain, a predestined arrangement of events that are to take place irrespective of the actions of individuals. In light of such an understanding of fate, gods are not mere observers of fate, but they also have the power to manipulate events according to their desires. This consideration grounds the absoluteness of fate following its course, seeing as gods have not altered fate and, where they might have sought to try, they have been limited by an active undertaking of other gods barring such actions from happening. Consequently, mortals exhibit a varied perspective on fate, but the constant throughout the *Iliad* is that, although mortals may wish to alter fate, they have no such powers. The understanding in mortals raises an issue of knowledge: both gods and men have knowledge of fate, but only gods can act upon this knowledge. One can see how, in general, the relationship between gods and mortals is intertwined with fate. Both recognize the inevitability of fate, however, only gods have knowledge of the specific aspects of fate and the events that lead to the predetermined destiny.

Human beings vary in their interpretations of a predetermined destiny, but the overall understanding lies in the deterministic nature of this destiny. Further, there are three aspects that conclusively confirm this. Firstly, Homer raises the issue of awareness and understanding of fate where both mortals and gods appear to know what fate is as well as how it affects them. The second is knowledge, where mortals are depicted as being in the know of what is to happen as per fate. This knowledge is typically absent in human beings, as Hector is completely in the dark regarding his impending destiny, but Achilles' arc seems to dispute this notion when he alludes to his supposed knowledge of events as they are to happen. However, Homer addresses this contradiction when he notes that Achilles does not know for certain what direction his life will go, and equally, events such as the death of Patroklos that occur also remove him from the fate he had willed to follow. Lastly, there is action: Homer confirms that mortals cannot affect their fate, although they may have intentions to alter it. Contrastingly, gods can alter fate but they do not although in some cases they do influence humans as a way to keep them on their course. This paper thus enriches Homeric worldview on fate and freewill. It supports the debatable perspective that the relationship between fate and free will in the Homeric worldview is not only contradictory but also enigmatic. Even so, one understands that fate is inevitable and though humans may want to change it, there is nothing they can do.

It is worth noting that the contradictions in the Homeric epics can be attributed to them being a product of oral-poetic tradition as opposed to being the arguments of one author. As such, inconsistencies are natural and normal. Take the case of Zeus in *Zeus Cathechized* for example, he questions the inconsistencies of poets being divinely inspired in some cases and then in other instances, there is no inspiration at all. The latter instance now generates inconsistencies. However, while various thoughts exist on the possibility of these inconsistencies, one cannot fail to

recognize the unit that exists in the manner in which traditional poetry is presented.

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