

The Extent of Destiny: Gods, People, and Fate in *The Iliad*

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What is the true extent of destiny? For thousands of years, people have struggled to determine the roles and proportions of free will and fate in human lives. In *The Iliad*, Homer writes of a continuous struggle between the mortal Greeks and Trojans, along with constant conflict among the gods. Immortals interject themselves into human affairs more often than not, and the bits of wisdom they share frequently have huge effects on the outcome of wars and on the lives of individuals. *The Iliad* depicts characters who struggle with the concept of fate by questioning, fighting, and accepting their destinies. Though the ancient Greeks had a complicated view of fate's function, analyzing Homer's ideas is important to the modern reader who hopes to gain some understanding of destiny as a timeless concept. In *The Iliad*, how is fate viewed by soldiers in war, and how is fate treated by the gods? Is every action pre-determined, or is there room for free will? Fate is foreseeable by certain mortals and determined by forces beyond the gods, but the humans do not trust fate absolutely because they see it as the will of Zeus, which fluctuates frequently. The gods do uphold fate, as determined by the boundaries of every person's life, and because the immortals follow fate's plan, destiny determines each life's ultimate outcome, but the rest is open to human free will even though it too is shaped by the gods.

The mortals seem to trust the seers and prophets, who commonly view fate as pre-determined. Before the Greeks sailed to Troy, "Calchas rose among them, / Thestor's son, the clearest by far of all the seers / who scan the flight of the birds. He knew all things that are, / all things that are past and all that are to come" (1.79-82). Calchas announces:

Zeus who rules the world has shown us an awesome sign . . .
 As the snake devoured the sparrow with her brood,
 eight and the mother made the ninth, she'd borne them all,
 so we will fight in Troy that many years and then,
 then in the tenth we'll take her broad streets. (2.383-389)

With this prophecy of war, destruction, and eventual victory, Calchas "led the Argive ships to Troy / with the second sight that god Apollo gave him" (1.83-84). Nations of armies join to fight based on the "will of Zeus" revealed to them by a seer (2.381). Nevertheless, this revealed will is not the same as a fate above the power of the gods, and evidently Zeus' will is changeable. Nine years of fighting pass, and the Greeks have thus far failed to take Troy. In an argument over a female prize, Agamemnon, king of the Achaeans, spites Achilles, his half-immortal, greatest, and most powerful warrior. With his honor and pride deeply wounded, Achilles leaves the battleground, taking many soldiers with him and pleads with Thetis, his immortal mother, to convince the Father god to turn the tide of the war against the Argives so that Agamemnon will have to beg Achilles to return to fight. Zeus, indebted to Thetis, promises to fulfill her request. Visibly and forcefully, Zeus begins to aid the Trojans, but despite the destruction around him, Agamemnon still believes in Calchas' vision of victory, saying, "For in my heart and soul I know this well: / the day must come when sacred Troy must die" (4.188-89). Despite his profession of faith, Agamemnon is truly afraid that his brother Menelaus, the true leader of the Argive forces, will perish, "fill[ing] out [his] destiny" (4.197) and forcing Agamemnon to leave Troy in disgrace. Agamemnon's questioning implies that he does not actually believe that fate is unchangeable. He certainly believes that death is the completion of an individual's destiny,

and that an important person's destiny can affect the destiny of a nation, but even though he claims to trust Calchas, he credits Zeus with determining when that destiny is to be fulfilled. The problem for the reader is to figure out whether Agamemnon is right to identify fate with the will of Zeus or whether prophecy, that is to say fate, overrides the Father god.

Like Agamemnon, many other soldiers express a belief in fate to keep themselves motivated to fight on, even if they appear to be acting against Zeus' apparent will at the time. Nestor, a steady and wise Greek elder, is frightened when Zeus appears to be partial to the Trojan side during the height of battle, but he realizes that on a daily basis, occurrences happen according to Zeus' temporarily altering his plans to meet circumstances, such as the anger of Achilles. "He hands glory to Hector, today at least - / tomorrow is ours, if he wants to give us glory. / There's not a man alive who can fight the will of Zeus" (8.161-63). The Trojans, encouraged when Zeus takes their side, also want to believe that there is still a chance of their success, regardless of the prophecy. They often repeat the lines: "We'll fight again tomorrow . . . / until some fatal power decides between us both, / handing victory down to our side - or the other" (7.434-36), showing that they cling to hope and are not willing to surrender to fate entirely. Regardless of whether they believe their destinies to be changeable or rigidly established, many people work to live a life of honor and to establish their reputations in the minds and hearts of their descendants through valor and legacy. Sarpedon voices the truths known to all soldiers, saying, "The fates of death await us . . . / not a man alive / can flee them or escape - so in we go for the attack! / Give our enemy glory or win it for ourselves" (12.378-81). Some may argue that destiny provides a detailed description of every person's life, but in the minds of the soldiers, fate does not dictate how honorable they should be when they meet

their deaths. Soldiers fighting in the war believe fate to be the will of Zeus, and their trust in prophesy varies depending on their circumstances. However, though Zeus' will appears to change because he aids one side one day and another side the next day, his ultimate will does not change. Bound by promises, Zeus' ultimate will is for Achilles to triumph over Hector, bringing about the fall of Troy and fulfilling the wishes of Athena and Hera. Nevertheless, human beings cannot know for sure what Zeus' ultimate will is. Hence, Hector and the Trojans are able to delude themselves temporarily that they will win, even though the prophecy has already stated that Troy is fated to be destroyed. Many characters remain hopeful in times of trouble despite what fate they have been told, and they still strive to achieve honor while living.

Though the gods do not determine fate, they seem to relate to the concept differently from the way most humans do. Instead of being concerned about how destiny will affect themselves or the people, the gods work alongside the fates and have the ability to act against them. Zeus tells Thetis, who has convinced him to aid her son Achilles to attain revenge against Agamemnon:

I will bow my head . . .

No word or work of mine - nothing can be revoked,

there is no treachery, nothing left unfinished

once I bow my head to say it shall be done. (1.626-631)

Zeus believes that his will will be carried out, regardless of the circumstances. It appears that Zeus has full control of destiny with this absolute statement, but he is more aware than anyone that Troy's fall truly is fated and certain. Zeus carefully considers the outcomes of each part of the war, but only up to the final point of Troy's destruction:

Father Zeus held out his sacred golden scales:
 in them he placed two fates of death that lays men low -
 one for the Trojan horsemen, one for Argives armed in bronze -
 . . . down went Achaea's day of doom, Achaea's fate
 settling down on the earth that feeds us all
 as the fate of Troy went lifting toward the sky. (8.81-87)

The highest god would not have consulted his scales if he himself determined fate; therefore, destiny is decided by a power other than Zeus. However, nothing binds Zeus to act in accordance with it. Though the forces of fate tip the scales and provide guidelines, no presence or being makes him intervene on behalf of the Trojans and destroy the Greeks with his mighty lightning. Zeus' motivation for acting in favor of the Trojans is questionable because nothing prompts him to act at all; however, enabling fate must be one of the gods' duties.

Lesser gods work to enforce the will of fate as well, and all immortals have the ability to oppose it even though doing so is unwise. At one point, Odysseus nearly kills Sarpedon during battle, "but no, it was not the gallant Odysseus' fate / to finish Zeus's rugged son with his sharp bronze, / so Pallas swung his fury against the Lycian front" (5.774-776). Apollo, aware of Sarpedon's destiny, exercises free will and elects to step in and act according to fate's guidelines. If Apollo had not interfered, the entire course of the war would have been changed, so he may have been destined to stop Odysseus. In this case, it is easy to postulate that every action, even the actions of the gods, is fated, but no evidence indicates that Apollo chooses any action independent of fate. The moment when Sarpedon is to die does come, however, and Zeus is tempted change the destiny of his son. However, he hesitates to interfere:

My Sarpedon . . .

doomed to die at the hands of Menoetius' son Patroclus.

My heart is torn in two as I try to weigh all this.

Shall I pluck him up, now, while he's still alive

and set him down in the rich green land of Lycia,

far from the war at Troy and all its tears?

Or beat him down at Patroclus' hands at last? (16.515-521)

Zeus decides to act in accordance with the established fate, though he has the power to go against it. Hera points out that if Zeus is to save his son, “none of the deathless gods will ever praise [Zeus]” (16.527), and “surely some other god will want to sweep / his own son clear of the heavy fighting too” (16.530-531). The rule of fate provides a standard of fairness for all the gods, maintaining order in the immortal realm. If Zeus, leader of all the immortals, were to disrupt the rules that he was supposed to follow and enforce, chaos would ensue, chaos which Zeus could have avoided entirely by simply maintaining the rule of fate. Some might say that allowing the gods to change fate undermines the concept of a certain outcome being entirely decided, and, in fact, it does. Within the text, however, the gods always act in accordance with fated destiny as they feel it to be their job to uphold and enable the fate. Sarpedon is Zeus' favorite man on earth, but Zeus realizes that even his life is not worth destroying the balance of the world; Zeus is bound to fate by his duty to retain order among the gods. Ultimately, the gods do not determine fate but rather act as enablers and enforcers, responsible for allowing the will of fate to be fulfilled.

The gods have many options within fate's guidelines, and much of what happens day-to-day develops according to the gods' will, not fate's. Each human's life is very much shaped by the gods, because deities truly do give the people their skills. Therefore, if one is an excellent fighter, the gods have enabled him in this way. At one point, Hector, prince of the Trojans, desires to be as superior in judgment as he is in battle skills, but his seer Polydamas says:

How can you hope to garner all the gifts at once?

One man is a splendid fighter - a god has made him so -

one's a dancer, another skilled at lyre and song,

and deep in the next man's chest farseeing Zeus

plants the gift of judgment, good clear sense. (13.842-846)

The immortals determine the physical traits and potential of each person, giving each one the qualities needed to fulfill fate.

While humans are given their skills and qualities, some characters use the idea of fate as a scapegoat to justify their unacceptable actions. For example, after the Greeks have suffered enormous losses and it becomes clear that Agamemnon erred in offending Achilles, in place of apologizing for his unnecessary rage, Agamemnon says, "Zeus and Fate. . . stalking through the night, / *they* are the ones who drove that savage madness in my heart, / . . . on my own authority, true, but what could *I* do? / A god impels all things to their fulfillment" (19.101-105). Regardless of how much the gods influence individuals, there is no evidence for Agamemnon's complete lack of control. Within the constraints of fate's control lie multiple opportunities for personal choice. Human free will may be very much restricted, but it does not disappear entirely.

People are permitted to act according to their own free will unless the gods decide that their actions are likely to oppose what is fated. Moreover, the gods allow apparent free will by providing dual, alternate fates to certain characters. Achilles' destiny is one of two separate paths, and, unlike most mortals, he lives his life fully conscious of his fate and the diverging roads before him. Though it leads to his early death, Achilles chooses to act in accordance with his fated glory when he re-enters the war after a long absence to exact retribution for the death of his closest friend, Patroclus. He has considered returning home, but honor and vengeance win out; he faces his death fearlessly. His choice to fight again helps to fulfill the prophecy of Troy's fall, so many will argue that returning home is never an option; it is not fated, and Achilles' other choice would not have been allowed. Whenever humans' actions threaten fate, the gods prevent them from proceeding. "If Achilles fights the Trojans - unopposed by us - / not for a moment will they hold his breakneck force. . . / I fear he'll raze the walls of Troy against the will of fate" (20.32-36), says Zeus. It is Achilles' fate to enter the war, but he is not destined to bring about Troy's ultimate downfall. If the gods choose which human decisions are allowed to succeed, free will seems to be a delusion, but the gods limit their active opposition only to choices that go against fate's outline; in this way, human free will is still possible. Through the actions of the gods, Homer makes it apparent that the deities have options, but only within certain boundaries. Rather than allowing Achilles to find Hector, to destroy him, and to raze the walls of Troy at this time, Zeus and numerous other immortals descend from the clouds and join the battle themselves, creating chaos. Zeus then fills Aeneas, a Trojan captain, with strength and inspires him to confront Achilles. Hera spots him advancing toward Achilles and says:

Poseidon, Athena,

decide in your hearts how this assault will go! . . .

Come, spin him round in his tracks and drive him back.

That, or else one of *us* might stand beside Achilles

and lend him winning force - his courage must not flag. . . .

Afterward he must suffer what the Fates spun out (20.137-149)

In this battle it does not matter whether Achilles and Aeneas fight as long as Achilles does not perish. Achilles is not fated to die just yet, so Zeus asks his brother and daughter to intervene in whatever way they see fit. While it initially appears that the gods pay no attention to the life of Aeneas and it seems that they do not know his fate or that he does not have one, Poseidon later says, “Let us rescue him from death ourselves, / for fear the son of Cronus might just tower in rage / if Achilles kills this man. He is destined to survive” (20.347-349). As long as the gods adhere to destiny’s outline, fate determines a person’s ultimate end, as well as establishes boundaries he has to act within during his day-to-day life.

Fate is a concept that is exceptionally important to humans, and it has received attention from great minds in every historical era. Homer’s polytheistic, complex ideas of destiny may initially seem irrelevant to the average present-day reader, but his portrayal of the agonizing uncertainty about who or what controls human outcomes still engages our efforts to account for that questioning and doubt. Within the scope of *The Iliad*, humans do not consistently feel that their fate is unchangeable, though they often assert that their destiny (death) is ultimately inescapable. Even those who recognize that their defensive actions will not affect their ultimate outcomes strive to gain honor for themselves and their fathers and

sons. Although the gods appear to have complete free will, they choose to serve as enforcers of fate even when they are not obligated to do so; the fates are an arbitrary set of rules to which the gods are not forced to adhere. People seek to understand how they are controlled by the gods, who keep them within the bounds of fate, but people are still free to make decisions for which they are responsible. Ultimately, there is order in Homer's world, maintained by the gods who determine the true extent of destiny.

Work Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1991. Print.