

Empathy in *Iliad* 24: A Research Note on the Moral Psychology of αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο

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Accepted for Presentation at the Joint Annual Meeting of the American Archaeological Association and the Society for Classical Studies, Philadelphia Jan. 4, 2025

Abstract

This paper explores what the Achilles-Priam scene at *Iliad* 24.469-676 – often called one of the most moving in all of literature (Weil 1940, Richardson 1993, Nagy 2023) – can tell us about the metaethics and psychodynamics of empathy. A close reading of these lines delineates the principal features of what I propose to call “empathesis,” the human achievement of a godlike empathic perspective. The analysis yields a five-fold model of humane understanding, comprising (1) morality; (2) epiphany; (3) proximity; (4) similarity; and (5) solidarity. While all five elements catalyze Achilles’ compassion for Priam, the scene follows Homeric patterning in presenting empathy as a correlate of what Nagler (1974) and Lynn-George (1996) have called the “creatural” aspects of our condition. Along these lines, eating cooked meat is a signature of humanity (Levi-Strauss 1978), and feasting on cattle, especially, is an index to correct and incorrect human behavior (McInerney 2010). Strikingly, epic empathy typically emerges just after ritual feasting marked by the deictic phrase αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πόσιος καὶ ἐδητύος ἐξ ἔρον ἔντο, “when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking.” This phrase appears twenty-two times in Homeric poetry – seven times in the *Iliad*, fourteen times in the *Odyssey*, and once in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* – and each occurrence triggers a representation of empathy. In the *Iliad* empathy is induced, on the average, 7 lines after the satiety phrase, in the *Odyssey*, 9 lines after it, in the *Hymn*, 18. Consistent with the arguments of Pucci (1987) and Bakker (2013), who find an ineluctable link between θυμός and γαστήρ, the quickest way the Homeric heart is through the stomach. As the Ithacan herald Medon says: “There’s much to be said for a meal at the right time” (*Od.* 17.176). The archaic Greeks knew implicitly that a meal shared to satiety induces empathy, something neuroscience has only recently proven (Tuulari, et al., 2017). The cross-cultural importance of this creaturely solidarity brings Homeric empathy into dialogue with recent philosophical and psychological research (Coplton 2011, McPherson 2020, Bailey 2022), and bears special relevance to contemporary initiatives for intergroup understanding (Betzler 2019, Mousa 2020, Paluck 2021). By sublimely leveraging the creaturely solidarities common to humans at all places and times, *Iliad* 24 induces what Virgil’s Aeneas, contemplating Achilles and Priam, calls “tears that connect with the universe” (*Aeneid* 1.462).