

Raging achilles: achilles' tragic flaw

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In the Iliad, Homer's character Achilles embodies many of the characteristics of a hero including strength, quickness, leadership, and particularly, courage. During the Trojan War, Achilles battles courageously, destroying and killing every man in his path without any sign of fear or retreat. No Achaean questions his abilities nor do they doubt his bravery; they cite him as one of their greatest warriors without whom they would have lost the war. However, according to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics, Achilles does not exemplify a man with true courage at all due to one simple character flaw.

Ironically, this acute flaw is mentioned in the first line of the Iliad: his spirited temper. According to Aristotle, a spirited temper prevents heroic men, like Achilles, from attaining a true courage because it alters the intentions behind their actions. Closer analysis of Achilles' spirited temper and its consequences illustrates that by Aristotle's definition, Achilles does not possess true courage, but merely a resemblance of it. Aristotle begins his argument by classifying a spirited temper as a quality similar to courage, claiming that anger propels a man to confront his fears.

Aristotle states "nothing makes a man ready to encounter dangers as a spirited temper" (3. 8. 1116b. 27), implying that a courageous man must be spirited. However, despite these claims, Aristotle counters, stating that possessing a spirited temper does not necessarily mean one automatically acquires true courage. He asserts that while a spirited temper can provide a truly courageous man (one with noble intentions) with support, a spirited temper can also deter a man from being truly courageous by altering his motives and incentives.

Since a spirited temper lends to anger and passion, these often replace reason and knowledge as the incentive behind the actions of courageous men, such as in the case of Achilles. These emotions then result in a variety of consequences for the owner, including blindness due to anger, a likeness to beasts, and an obsession with revenge. A close examination of Achilles and his actions reveals how his spirited temper changes his motivation, and consequently inhibits him from being truly courageous in an Aristotelian sense. The basis of a spirited temper is anger, which Aristotle both praises and criticizes.

On one hand, anger overcomes fear and gives man the courage to face his fears. However, anger can also influence man's ability to think and dominate his motivations and desires. Thus, anger can catapult man to commit actions not out of courage, but out of passion. For example, in the Iliad, Achilles' anger transcends his ability to reason and consequently impels him to engage in battle with the river god Scamander after being insulted. Even after almost being killed by the river, Achilles' anger prevents him from leaving the river and so, he "[surges] on...with high hurdling strides, charging against the river" (21. 42-343). Aristotle states that anger must be experienced under the "right circumstances and with the right people, and also in the right manner, at the right time, and for the right length of time" (4. 5. 1125b. 32-34). In Achilles' case, he exhibits none of these. Achilles directs his anger for Hector towards the wrong target, the river. In addition, he holds onto his anger longer than he should and simultaneously risks his life. According to Aristotle, Achilles is therefore short-tempered and does not possess a true courage.

His anger overtakes his reasoning abilities, driving him to commit undesirable acts and leaving him without noble intentions. Achilles' anger also affects his perceived physical state of being and further alters his motives by fueling his desires for revenge. In Aristotle's argument, he explains that men provoked by spirited tempers are comparable to beasts and therefore not courageous. In the Iliad, Homer often describes Achilles analogous to an animal. During the battle, Achilles is depicted as "rearing like some lion" (20. 94) and "thundering on, on like oxen broad in the brow" (20. 560). These descriptions illustrate a lack of restraint and semblance to a wild beast, thus further supporting the argument that Achilles is not in fact courageous. Aristotle states that "wild beasts are motivated by pain...thus they are not courageous, because they are spurred by...a roused temper to rush into danger..." (3. 8. 1116b. 33-36). Achilles epitomizes this Aristotelian idea by acting in response to a base emotion: anger. Rather than being motivated by reason or knowledge, Achilles allows his anger to stimulate him.

Consequently, this anger causes Achilles to lose parts of his humanity and bringing him closer to his animalistic base, which is further reflected in descriptions of his actions. Homer describes how "Achilles charged, wild, hurtling toward [Aeneas], loosing a savage cry" (20. 327). Not only does this portray a baser, less human side of Achilles, but it also supports Aristotle's idea that those who rush into danger blinded by their anger do not foresee the perils in store. In this case, despite Aeneas' inferiority in ability, he is able to take this opportunity of momentary blindness to attack Achilles.

This example illustrates Aristotle's argument that Achilles' spirited temper makes him similar to nothing more than a wild beast lacking true courage. Aristotle's definition of courage also states that revenge as motivation corrupts true courage and leaves only a resemblance of courage. Achilles exemplifies a man who allows anger to fuel his desire for vengeance to distort his natural courage and purpose, leaving only a likeness of courage. Homer describes explicitly that Achilles' motivation to enter the battle lies in his desire for revenge.

Upon learning of Patroclus' death, Achilles immediately declares that he will enter the battle. Achilles proclaims, " Despite my anguish I will beat it down, the fury mounting inside me, down by force. But now I'll go and meet that murderer head-on, that Hector who destroyed the dearest life I know" (Homer 18. 134-138). After having obstinately refused to enter the battle despite the promises of riches and glory, Achilles allows his desire for revenge to propel him into battle almost instantaneously. In fact, as the battle progresses, Achilles' desire for revenge begins to resemble an obsession.

He refuses to release his anger towards Hector, stating his desire for revenge even halfway through the battle. Achilles says, " But now, Patroclus...I shall not bury you, no, not till I drag back here the gear and head of Hector, who slaughtered you" (Homer 17. 387-390). This quote illustrates Achilles' complete fixation with revenge. Thus, according to Aristotle, he no longer acts through courage, but through obsession. While it is arguable that Achilles' lack of fear of death makes him courageous, his

basic motivations, revenge and anger, again prevent him from being truly courageous in the Aristotelian sense.

Throughout the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle states man's incentive as the defining aspect in which to characterize man. In Achilles' case, his anger-fueled obsession with revenge motivates and supports his ability to fight; therefore, according to Aristotle, Achilles is "not guided by reason, but by emotion" (3. 8. 1117a. 8). Aristotle further explains that while revenge gives men support and pleasure, it does not imply courage. Aristotle states, "Although those who fight for this motive are good fighters, they are not courageous, for it is not the incentive of what is noble that makes them fight" (Aristotle 3. 7. 117a. 5). Aristotle concludes his argument by stating that when choice and true purpose guide a spirited temper, a man becomes truly courageous. Achilles, however, motivated by anger and revenge, does not resemble this truly courageous man. While Achilles does not fit this definition, he does nevertheless seem to have some form of courage arisen from his spirited temper. Aristotle defines this type of courage as a "natural courage." Thus, Achilles does not possess true courage, but rather a natural courage governed by his base emotions.