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# SCEPTICISM IN HOMER?

It has been claimed that the earliest expression of a robust scepticism is in the Catalogue of Ships in the *Iliad*, and even commentators who would not go that far have thought the passage an important guide to epistemological attitudes in Homeric antiquity.[1] It will be argued here that a close examination of the text does not support such conclusions. On the other hand, there are respectable reasons for an interpretation in which religious factors are operative, rather than epistemic ones. The conclusion to be drawn is that the epistemic reading is groundless.

The relevant lines form an introduction to the Catalogue of Ships; an inelegant but literal translation would be:

(484) Tell me now, Muses, having houses on Olympus,
(485) – for you are goddesses and you are present to and know all,
(486) and we hear report (κλέος) alone, not anything do we know –
(487) who the leaders of the Danaans and rulers were.[2]

The words translated as 'know' are forms of 'εἴδω'; I take it the translation 'not anything do we know', or 'we do not know anything', is not controversial. The line does not just say that there are many things we do not know, leaving it open that there are many things which we do. What is said is that 'we' do not know at all. Note that the poet has used a singular pronoun to refer to himself in line 484, and thus when he says *we* do not know he appears to be making a claim about people in general, or at least about people in his present. There is thus a temptation to read the passage as expressing a pre-philosophical epistemology.

It is not difficult to cite examples of authors who have succumbed to the temptation. At least one strongly sceptical interpretation of the Muse Prayer occurs in the literature. (Since it has been well and extensively discussed by others, I shall only summarize the contention, and the objections of its critics.) According to B. Snell, in Homeric Greek it is analytic that knowledge is knowledge by personal experience, as no other concept of knowledge has yet evolved.[3] The reason for the scepticism is supposed to be that humans are not present to all things, as the goddesses are. This Snell thesis about the Greek meanings makes the Muse Prayer quite straightforward. If knowledge is no more than knowledge of what is present to one, one's spatial and temporal limitations will guarantee one does not have knowledge over large areas, since there will be much to which one is not present. This would fall short of the 'we do not know anything', but is still radically sceptical. However, such a broad explanation of the scope of the scepticism would not appear to be consistent with the rest of Homer. Characters in the poems are said to have –

[1] The most important sources of the 'epistemic' interpretation are: B. Snell, *Die Ausdrücke für den Begriff des Wissens in der vorplatonischen Philosophie* (New York, 1976), pp. 24–6, n. 1; E. Hussey, 'The Beginnings of Epistemology: from Homer to Philolaus', *Epistemology, Companions to Ancient Thought*: Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 11–38; J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (London and New York, 1989), p. 137.

[2] Translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

[3] B. Snell, *Die Ausdrücke*, pp. 24–6, n. 1. The thesis is criticized by E. Heitsch, 'Das Wissen des Xenophanes', *RhMus* 109 (1966), 193–235. I am following Hussey's interpretation. See E. Hussey (op. cit., n. 1), pp. 12–13.

or say they have – knowledge of the remote past and future. There is no sign from the poet that such claims are faulty.[4] This would seem to dispose of the Snell thesis as a claim about the meanings of words for 'knowledge' in Homeric Greek, and with it the sceptical reading of the Muse Prayer favoured by Snell. Of course, it is possible to hold that the passage represents an earlier usage in Greek, surfacing only here in Homer. However, such a rescue would look suspiciously *ad hoc*.

It is also at least somewhat embarrassing for any strongly sceptical reading of the Muse Prayer that there is no evidence the passage was understood in this way in classical antiquity. Nor do other passages in Homer support a sceptical reading. Diogenes Laertius gives quotations from Homer which were supposed to have been interpreted sceptically by Pyrrho, but 2.484–7 is not among them.[5] The passages are all in the *Iliad*. Pyrrho is said to have admired 6.146, which is the often-quoted comparison of human life with leaves. This is suitably pessimistic, no doubt, but is not especially relevant to scepticism. At 21.106 occurs Achilles' taunt to Polydorus, which tells the doomed man he has no right to complain, since Patroclus, a better man, is already dead. Again, there does not appear to be any interesting connection with scepticism. Book 20.248–50 says no more than that humans utter many things, with the suggestion that they contradict one another. The sceptics made much of oppositions, of course, and probably read this passage in that light. But it does not explicitly say anything of a sceptical bent. Sextus Empiricus notes Pyrrho's interest in Homer in *Against the Grammarians*, at 271 and 281–2, but does not give examples. All in all, the Muse Prayer in the Catalogue of Ships is the only passage in Homer which sounds sceptical enough to present a problem of interpretation.[6]

There was a tradition that Homer was the origin of scepticism.[7] On the other hand, all the prominent philosophical schools of antiquity tried to claim an ancestry in Homer. Seneca summarized the situation:

> ...sometimes they make of him a Stoic, who approves nothing but virtue, avoids pleasures, and refuses to relinquish honour even at the price of immortality; sometimes they make him an Epicurean, praising the condition of a state in repose, which passes its days in feasting and song; sometimes a Peripatetic, classifying goodness in three ways; sometimes an Academic, holding that all things are uncertain. It is clear, however, that no one of these doctrines is to be fathered upon Homer, just because they are all there; for they are irreconcilable with one another.[8]

[4] Hussey notes, for example, that at *Il.* 20.203 Aeneas says he and Achilles know (using the same Greek word as in 2.486) each other's family lineage and parents, though neither has seen with his eyes the family of the other. That is, they seem to have knowledge based on report about what they have not themselves experienced in the present and past, and presumably about a past prior to any of their contemporaries (since genealogical knowledge of two famous families is involved). The Snell reading is not consistent with knowledge in a case of this sort. See also J. H. Lesher, 'Perceiving and Knowing in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*', *Phronesis* 26 (1981), p. 14.

[5] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, R. D. Hicks, trans., (Cambridge, 1925), Vol. II, pp. 481, 487.

[6] This is not to say that there are no other passages which are relevant to scepticism. It is striking that deception by the gods is an obtrusive and repetitive feature of the Homeric poems. See, e.g., *Il.* 6.15, 22.226–99, 21.600–5; *Od.* 13.189–96, 13.299–300, and especially 17.483–7. When Descartes raised the epistemic problem of the possibility of a deceiving God in the First Meditation, he did so in a tradition which thought of the divine as veridical. But according to Homeric religious beliefs, divine deception is not just a theoretical possibility, but a recurring fact. Yet the sceptical possibilities never seem to have been recognized or exploited.

[7] 'Some call Homer the founder of this school, for to the same questions he more than anyone else is always giving different answers at different times, and is never definite or dogmatic about the answer.' Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, 483–4.

[8] Seneca, Epistle LXXXVIII, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, R. M. Gummere (trans.), (London, 1930), Vol. II, pp. 351–2.

It is unfortunate that Seneca does not say which passages were used to identify Homer as an Academic Sceptic, as 2.484–7 would look a likely candidate. But in any event, Seneca's comments are a sensible warning of the hazards of trying to find philosophical positions in Homer.

Even so, others have read the Muse Prayer as a guide to what might be called a 'folk epistemology'. Thus, J. Barnes has claimed, without argument:

> Lockean scepticism was endemic in the Greek mind. Its *locus classicus* is in the second book of the *Iliad*, where the poet seeks help from the Muses....[9]

Barnes does not explain what he means by 'Lockean scepticism', but presumably the reference is to the advice of the Introduction to the *Essay*:

> For though the comprehension of our understandings comes exceeding short of the vast extent of things, yet we shall have cause enough to magnify the bountiful Author of our being, for that proportion and degree of knowledge he has bestowed on us...Men have reason to be well satisfied with what God hath thought fit for them, since he hath given them...whatsoever is necessary for the conveniences of life and information of virtue...We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us; for of that they are very capable.[10]

This kind of scepticism concerns empirical knowledge of matters without pragmatic import for obtaining 'the conveniences of life and information of virtue'. Knowledge of remote times or places would fall under the ban, and I take it this is why Barnes ties the Muse Prayer to Lockean scepticism. But Barnes does not explain why the Muse Prayer restricts human knowledge in this way, or precisely why there is a resemblance between Homer and Locke.

E. Hussey has elaborated what appears to be an interpretation of the same type, but in much greater detail. He has it that the scepticism rests on the unverifiability (in a Homeric context) of a κλέος about the remote past:

> Where scepticism gets a serious hold in Homer is where the subject-matter lies beyond the boundaries of personal or collective human verifiability. This means, above all, (1) the remote past, including for Homer and his contemporaries, the heroic age; (2) the distant future; (3) the secrets of Fate and the plans of the gods. To return to *Iliad* 2.485–6: the heroic age is outside the reach of collective knowing; continuity has been broken. Good information is available, but it comes from a non-human source, the Muses. The bare possibility of deception by the Muses is allowed to disqualify claims to knowledge. The cardinal rule of the bare possibility is characteristic of sceptical thinking.[11]

The reports in line 486 are, according to Hussey, those of the Muses. This is our only source of information about the heroic age, and if the Muses were to deceive us, we would not be able to detect the deception. The Muses' reports are not verifiable, and this is why they do not constitute knowledge.

Hussey's interpretation is thus one version of reading (R), which also seems to have been of the type favoured by Cornford.[12]

R: (484) Tell me now, Muses, having houses on Olympus,
(487) who the leaders of the Danaans and rulers were
(485) [and you're able] for you are goddesses and are present to and know all,
(486) and we [in the present?] hear only a κλέος [about the heroic age? about who the leaders were?], [and thus] not anything do we know [about the heroic age? about who the leaders were?]

[9] J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 137.
[10] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (New York, 1959), p. 29.
[11] E. Hussey (op. cit., n. 1), p. 17.
[12] F. M. Cornford, *Principium Sapientiae* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 76.

That is, the scepticism, if one wants to call it that, could be just about knowledge of the Trojan War. This interpretation does no violence to the text, and explains why reports are mentioned and what they are about. One might quarrel with the details of Hussey's particular version of this; the verificationism sounds too sophisticated for Homer, and it is far from clear that the reports in question are those of the Muses. But one might argue for an explanation according to which the scepticism is a readily intelligible outgrowth of familiar facts about the unreliability of hearsay.

However, there is a *prima facie* implausibility about (R). The kind of κλέος in question is presumably either a traditional belief held by humans, or (as Hussey has it) a report of the Muses. According to reading (R), then, either (1) our traditional beliefs about the past do not constitute knowledge (unless they're substantiated by the Muses?) or (2) the reports of the Muses do not give us knowledge.

The second alternative (the one adopted by Hussey) seems to conflict with the purpose for which the prayer is made. I would have thought that the point of the appeal to the Muses is that they will give us knowledge about the events in question. On the other hand, the first alternative is odd, given the nature and age of the text. That folk beliefs about the past do not constitute knowledge is not the sort of claim one would expect in a popular entertainment, in what was still a traditional society. Of course, this argument is not conclusive; Homer, whatever he was, was a great genius, and it is dangerous to set *a priori* limits as to what he would or would not believe. Still, in the absence of other evidence, (R) is not wholly convincing.

Readings of type (R) trade on the supposed epistemic deficiencies of a κλέος, or at least of an unverifiable κλέος about a remote past. But an examination of the Homeric texts does not substantiate the charge that a κλέος is inherently unreliable, or that it requires independent verification. Perhaps the problem is just supposed to be about a κλέος of the distant past, but at any rate the text does not establish this.

The word 'κλέος' occurs in the singular 61 times in Homer, and three in the plural.[13] With nine exceptions, it is used to refer to reputation or fame, especially the good reputation or fame desired by the Homeric soldier. In seven places in the *Iliad* and five in the *Odyssey* it is qualified by ἐσθλόν; 'good reputation' is then the natural translation.[14] Achilles wants an imperishable κλέος at *Il.* 9.413. In other places 'κλέος' is not qualified as favourable (or unfavourable), but the sense still seems to be 'good reputation' or perhaps 'glory' or 'fame'. Thus at *Il.* 4.197 it is said of Pandarus that 'to him, κλέος, to us, sorrow.' At *Il.* 8.192 the word is applied to the golden shield of Nestor, the κλέος of which is said to come to heaven; the sense does not seem to be different even in the case of this inanimate object (though here the meaning is close to that of the second use of the word).

The other use of 'κλέος' is more prominent in the *Odyssey*. At 1.283 Athena tells Telemachus to go to Sparta, where some mortal may tell him of his father, or he may

[13] The occurrences in the *Iliad* are: 2.325 & 486; 4.197 & 207; 5.3, 172, 273, 532; 6.446; 7.91, 451, 458; 8.192; 9.413 & 415; 10.212; 11.21 & 227; 13.364; 15.564; 17.16, 131, 143, 232; 18.121; 22.514; 23.280. In the *Odyssey*: 1.95, 240, 283, 298, 344; 2.125 & 217; 3.78, 83, 204, 380; 4.584, 726, 816; 5.311; 7.333; 8.74 & 147; 9.20 & 264; 13.415 & 422; 14.370; 16.241 & 461; 18.126 & 255; 19.108, 128, 333; 23.137; 24.33, 94, 196. The plural occurs at *Iliad* 9.189 & 524, and in the *Odyssey* at 8.73. The related δυσκλέα occurs at *Iliad* 2.114, and at 9.22; ἀκλέα is found at *Odyssey* 4.728. These references have been obtained from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*.

[14] See *Il.* 5.3, 5.273, 9.415, 17.16, 17.143, 18.121, 23.280; *Od.* 1.95, 3.380, 13.422, 18.126, 24.94. It is especially this use which has been discussed by scholars, though in quite different contexts than the one relevant here. See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 16–117, and his *Comparative Studies in Greek and Indic Meter* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 27–149. See also J. S. Clay, *The Wrath of Athena* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), pp. 108–11.

hear from Zeus, who often brings a κλέος to men. At 16.461 Telemanchus asks about the κλέος in the city. A similar use occurs at 23.137, regarding the news of the slaying of the suitors. (It is significant that the derivative 'ἀκλεής' is used for lack of news at 4.728.) In these κλέος is something like 'report' or 'news'. The word is sometimes translated as 'rumour', which suggests an unfounded or erroneous report; so far as I can see, the passages in question do not imply that the κλέος is low quality news. Other fairly clear-cut examples are at *Od.* 2.217, 3.83, 4.728, and 18.415.

The use of 'κλέος' to mean 'report' may occur three times in the *Iliad* (in addition to 2.486), though the instances are more debatable than those in the *Odyssey*. In 11.21 we are told of a man who came from Cyprus because he had heard of the κλέος of the expedition which was about to sail to Troy; a similar case occurs at line 227. At 13.364 a man comes after the κλέος of war. Since a κλέος may attach to an inanimate object, as in the case of Nestor's shield, the κλέος of the expedition might be like the reputation or fame of a hero, but this reading is much less plausible in the case of a κλέος of war.

In only one place is the possibility of a false κλέος implicitly recognised. At *Il.* 17.143 Glaucus tells Hector that he has a good κλέος, though being a runaway. The charge is unfair, of course, but is of interest because it shows that having a κλέος with a content *p* does not entail that *p* is true. On the other hand, there is nothing in Homer (other than 2.486!) to suggest that a κλέος is inherently unreliable, or requires independent confirmation to count as knowledge. Of course, (R) might still be right; the other examples of knowledge based on a κλέος are not unsubstantiated reports of a remote past. But the point is that the other instances of the word 'κλέος' do not support interpretation (R), though they do not provide evidence against it, either.

However, there is an alternative to these 'epistemic' interpretations. The Muse Prayer is only one example of a number of similar passages in early Greek literature in which humans are said to be ignorant, or foolish, or powerless, in explicit or implicit contrast with the gods. In the *Hymn to Demeter* we are told by the goddess in lines 256–7 that

> Unknowing (νήιδες) are humans and foolish (ἀφράδμονες) not foreseeing the good or evil that comes upon them.

It would appear that the problem here is supposed to be about our knowledge of the future, and in that respect at least there is a dissimilarity with the Muse Prayer. But once more we have denigration of humans, and, by implication, praise of the divinities at an opposite extreme. Here and elsewhere the powers that humans really do have are discounted. Humans are not ignorant or helpless or foolish without qualification, even about what the future holds, yet they are called so in contrast with the gods.

Lines 189–93 of the *Hymn to Pythian Apollo* describe the gatherings of the gods on Olympus:

> The Muses all together, sweet voice answering voice, sing hymns of the immortal gifts of the gods, and the sufferings of humans, which are from the deathless gods; they live, foolish (ἀφραδέες) and helpless, nor are they able to find healing for death or defence against old age.

To be foolish and to be ignorant are two different things, as the example of some of one's university colleagues clearly shows. But as in the previous example, and in the Muse Prayer, humans are made to look as poor as possible, and the contrast with the gods is as great as possible.

The theme of human ignorance about the future, contrasted with divine omniscience, is a recurrent one. Here is Theognis at lines 135–42:

> No men work, knowing in their hearts,
> whether the outcome will be good or bad.
> For often thinking to do bad one does good,
> and thinking to do good one does bad.
> To no man comes what he wants,
> for bonds of hard impossibility prevent it.
> We humans believe follies, knowing nothing.
> The gods accomplish all according to their plans.

This remarkable expression of pessimism resembles the previous cases. There is the contrast between the gods, who can accomplish all, and powerless humans who know, at least, nothing about the future. The same theme occurs in Pindar, *Nemean* 6.6, and in Solon.[15]

There is a pattern here. An ascription (or an implied ascription) of a property F to the gods is coupled with a denial of F to humans. And no particular reason seems to be given for why humans lack the property (wisdom, say, or knowledge of the future), save perhaps that it is otherwise with the gods. As will emerge, this pattern explains much, if not all, about the Muse Prayer.

The beginning of wisdom with respect to 2.484–7 may be to recall that it is a prayer. Someone addressing the divine, whether in Homer's culture or our own, is at pains to stress the greatness of the deity and, by comparison, the smallness of human beings. The gods are all, while humans are nothing. Or at least, that is a frequent attitude in prayer. Gods and humans are at opposite extremes; an attribution to the divine tends to produce its denial to the human.[16] Something similar, I expect, is happening in the other cases we have looked at; though they are not prayers, the passages are either in, or are appropriate to, a religious context.

The praise of the goddesses in 485 is exaggerated, and one might expect the same to be true of the denigration of humans. The goddesses were not at hand to all things, and with respect to some matters they are in the same position as humans. After all, there was a time at which they were born, so of the things before their birth they presumably have only a κλέος. Yet the poet, in adoration, says 'you are present to and know all'. That the gods know everything is a Homeric commonplace, and yet

[15] For Solon, see 13.65–6, in J. M. Edmonds, *Elegy and Iambus*, (Cambridge: Loeb C. L., 1954), p. 130. Another example of the same sort occurs in Heraclitus. Fragment 78 runs:

> for human nature does not have understanding,
> the divine nature has.

Heraclitus is notoriously obscure, and what is behind the fragment is a matter for scholarly debate. My interest in it is the contrast between the ability of divinity and the ignorance of humans, which also seems to be at work in the other cases. Some scholars see Heraclitus as closely approximating later sceptical arguments and tenets. See, for example, L. Groarke, *Greek Scepticism* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990), pp. 34–7. Of course, there is also what may be scepticism in Xenophanes. But this seems to be about knowledge concerning the gods, rather than about human knowledge in general as opposed to divine omniscience. See J. H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon* (Toronto, 1992), p. 39, and K. Freeman, *Ancilia to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 24. The wording of fragment 34 does not suggest any connection with *Il.* 2.484–7, though it may show that sceptical tendencies are present in Greek thought quite early on. Lesher has a critical discussion of scepticism in Xenophanes; see pp. 155–69. Whatever the story on Xenophanes, it is one thing to find epistemology among the pre-Socratics, and another to find it in Homer.

[16] It may be that this contrast can be seen as an instance of a tendency among the ancient Greeks to think in terms of oppositions. See G. E. R. Lloyd, *Polarity and Analogy* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 41–90.

there are numerous cases of gods being tricked or deceived, which would be incompatible with their omniscience. Hera's deceptions of Zeus, and *vice versa* are an obvious case in point, but there are others, such as the failure of Ares to know that his son has been killed at *Il.* 13.521–2. It is startling when Menelaus implies at *Od.* 4.468 that the Old Man of the Sea must be able to answer a question, since the gods know all things; Menelaus has just successfully tricked this god! Pretty clearly, the claim about divine omniscience is not portrayed as being literally true.

Someone who read the Muse Prayer as an example of a doctrine of divine omniscience in Homer would have missed the point. The function of the remark is to praise the goddesses, rather than to give information about divinities. I suggest that whatever the scope of the 'we do not know anything', its point is also to praise the goddesses, by depreciating the worshipper. The compliment is implied: 'You are so much greater than we'. To put it bluntly, the denial of human knowledge is as insincere as the Homeric ascriptions of omniscience to the gods. In both cases, the motive may be to avert the consequences of hubris. After all, the poet is about to do something especially remarkable (as he himself seems to stress in lines 488–92).

If the above is right, it is misguided to ask: 'Does 2.485 literally mean that the knowledge of the goddesses is unlimited?' Well, that is what it says, but given the background in the rest of Homer neither an affirmative nor a negative answer is satisfactory. I think it is also a mistake to ask: 'Does the Muse Prayer mean that we have no knowledge of the Trojan War based on traditional beliefs?' Presumably the κλέος in question is about the Trojan War, and it is tempting to read the 'we do not know anything' as referring to knowledge of that war. However, given the context, it is doubtful that the lines are an epistemological reflection about the status of unverifiable statements. The Muse Prayer is another instance of

the gods are F; humans are not F,

where F is a desirable property. It is the pattern, rather than the content, which is supposed to warrant what may be an indeterminate contrast. The pattern is, I take it, a matter of watching what one says where the divinities are concerned. This is why neither ascription need be consistent with the rest of Homer, when the latter is not dealing with matters about which the gods might take offence.

If I am right, the bit about a κλέος is something of a red herring. It is not that there is something wrong with a κλέος, or a κλέος of a particular kind, and thus that humans do not have knowledge based on it. Rather, knowledge is denied to humans simply because the gods have it; thus there is something wrong with a κλέος, because it is the only way in which humans could have knowledge of the Trojan War, without the help of the goddesses. What is wrong with a κλέος is that it is a *human* way of knowing.

Epistemic interpretations attempt to read doctrines about the scope of human knowledge into the Muse Prayer, even if only relatively unexciting ones regarding the remote past. But trying to get folk epistemology out of the Muse Prayer may well be like reading a doctrine of divine omniscience into Homer. It is to ignore a background in which humans need to take care when dangerous comparisons with the gods are concerned.

Of course, I do not mean that a religious reading of the text is incompatible with an epistemic one. It might be that the Muse Prayer is a manifestation of beliefs about the scope of human knowledge, and praise of the goddesses as well. And something of the same sort might be true of the other passages noted above. But the religious explanation of these texts is sufficient to explain what they say. The view that the

Muse Prayer is an expression of a folk epistemology requires some corroboration, given the availability of the alternative explanation. But, as noted above, the epistemic reading is not substantiated either by linguistic considerations, or by the requirements of other passages in Homer. In the absence of further argument, I conclude that the epistemic reading is gratuitous.

*Department of Philosophy* H. M. ZELLNER
*Kent State University*