

The Problem of the Hyper-competent Subordinate

A common trope in modern science fiction – and bugaboo of AI doom literature – is the autonomous super-human machine. Another modern (and Romantic) trope is the rebellious, antisocial, occasionally Luciferian genius. In this talk I generalize these tropes as the problem of hyper-competent subordinate. I suggest that, in this more general form, problems raised by modern technological and social complexity (including democratic leadership, expertise, and generative AI) are examined already in Homeric epic.

The problem of the hyper-competent subordinate appears as the *Iliad* opens. Achilles is a better warrior than Agamemnon; under Apollo's arrows, Achilles is also a better leader. Apparently threatened, Agamemnon tries to deny Achilles' superiority by asserting pure superordinate power; the result is a failure of command, as countless Achaeans die because of Achilles' resulting departure. The *Iliad's* treatment of the problem is straightforward but aporetic: Achilles returns to battle without re-integrating into the larger Achaean force (rejecting Agamemnon's apologetic gifts, fighting not for Helen's return but for Patroclus' revenge). The perspective is bottom-up, privileging the subordinate over the commander: the *Iliad's* primary view is Achilles' view, of warriors dying in war.

The problem is raised from another angle and solved at a cosmic level between the beginning and end of the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey's* take is theological and indirect. Odysseus' lack of *nostos*, raised during the Olympian conversation in *Odyssey* 1, is generally seen from an epistemological point of view, as a conclusive counter-example to Zeus' theodicy. Flipwise, I take Odysseus' homelessness ontologically: his imprisonment on Calypso's island is the sub-Olympian substance ('truth-maker') of Athena's disagreement with Zeus. But in Olympian

terms, Athena's relation to Zeus is this Hesiodic divine generation's instantiation of *metis*' relation to celestial rule – the Olympian-familial-political projection of the relation between cleverness, or skill, or *tekhne*, and its wielder, elsewhere narrated (and painted) as the Hephaestus-exerted violence against Zeus' skull that brought Athena from brain-internal Metis into the world.

In Athena's refutation of theodicy, traditionally god-defeating *metis* denies Zeus' *dike*; but by returning Odysseus home (removing Zeus' theodicy's 'false-maker'), Athena is restored to Zeus' command (explicitly: cf. Zeus' words to Athena as *Odyssey* 24 ends: 'do whatever you want, but I will tell you how to act fittingly' / ἔρξον ὅπως ἐθέλεις: ἐρέω τέ τοι ὡς ἐπέουκεν). The perspective is top-down, privileging the commander over the subordinate: the *Odyssey*'s primary view is Odysseus' (and analogously Zeus') view, of the commander restored to power.

Works cited

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