



**Suffering, Pity and Friendship: An Aristotelian Reading of Book 24 of Homer's *Iliad***

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Book 24 of Homer's *Iliad* presents us with one of the most beautiful and chilling scenes of the epic: the scene where Achilles and Priam directly face one another at the point when the suffering (*pathos*) of each seems to have reached its pinnacle. Achilles' suffering is centered on the loss of his best friend Patroclus, while the suffering of Priam – although long in the making due to the attack on his city and his family – has reached a new level of despair with the loss of his dearest son Hector. At first sight, the suffering of each man seems very different in its nature and expression. Achilles grieves over his friend and lifetime companion, and expresses this grief in both deep sadness and rage. In Homer's words:

... But sleep  
That masters all had no hold on Achilles.  
Tears wet his face as he remembered his friend.  
He tossed and turned, yearning for Patroclus,  
For his manhood and his noble heart,  
And all they had done together, and the woes suffered  
together (*tolypeuse syn autoi kai pathen algea*),  
The battles fought, the hard times at sea.

Thinking on all this, he would weep softly,  
Lying now on his side, now on his back,  
And now face down. Then he would rise  
To his feet and wander in a daze along the shore.  
Dawn never escaped him. As soon as she appeared  
Over the sea and the dunes, he would hitch  
Horses to his chariot and drag Hector behind.  
(Homer, *Iliad*, 24:3-15)<sup>1</sup>

By contrast, Priam's suffering is that of a father grieving over the death of his most beloved son. After Priam's son Hector has been killed, Homer describes Priam as petrified – with signs that indicate previous writhing:

.....The old man,  
Wrapped in his mantle, sat like graven stone.  
His head and neck were covered with dung  
He had rolled in and scraped up with his hands.  
(Homer, *Iliad*, 24:161-165).

Not only are the nature and expression of their suffering different, these men themselves seem utterly incomparable: Achilles is a young, powerful fighter, and the son of a goddess; Priam is an old, noble yet frail, king of a besieged city, and father to many children. Achilles is fighting on the side of the Achaeans; Priam is king on the side of the Trojans.

Yet, despite the many differences visible between Priam and Achilles, Book 24 of the *Iliad* brings them together in a remarkable fashion. In one of the most intimate moments of the *Iliad*, we find Priam and Achilles crying together – and thereby seemingly identifying with each other, thus overcoming their multiple differences. This paper seeks to analyze in what way Priam and Achilles come to identify with each other, and whether Priam and Achilles ultimately suffer together, or whether their sufferings remain ultimately their own. To answer this question, I will first briefly explore Aristotle's account of (tragic) suffering and discuss his analysis of King Priam's suffering in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Subsequently, I will examine the topic of suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Lombardo's translation (1997) slightly modified. This translation will be used consistently throughout this paper.

and co-suffering through the lens of Aristotle's account of pity in his *Rhetoric*, since precisely that account offers us interesting insights on the difference between pity and suffering together.

### Part One: Aristotle on Happiness, Virtue & King Priam's Suffering

In Book Delta of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle provides a list of the different meanings of the term *pathos*. Among its meanings is the sense of *pathos* as a painful and destructive experience. In Aristotle's own words:

misfortunes and pains of considerable magnitude (*ta megethê tôn sumphorôn kai luperôn*) are called *pathê* (*Metaphysics* V.21, 1022b19-20).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, *pathos*, for Aristotle, can mean that kind of extreme suffering that we encounter in Homer's *Iliad*. In fact, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle explicitly refers to the *Iliad* as a work that is rich in suffering or that is, in his words, "*pathêtikê*" (*Poetics* 24, 1459b14). Yet, we may ask: how does Aristotle conceptualize that experience about which it is so hard to speak? An answer may be found in the following passage of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle first explicitly mentions King Priam and his suffering. He writes:

Happiness (*eudaimonia*), as we have said, requires completeness in virtue as well as a complete lifetime. Many changes (*metabolai*) and all kinds of contingencies (*tychai*) befall (*ginontai*) a person in the course of his life, and it is possible that the most prosperous (*malist' euthenounta*) person will encounter great misfortunes (*megalais symphorais*) in his old age, as the Trojan legends tell about Priam. When a person has met a fate such as his and has come to a wretched end, no one calls him happy (*eudaimonidzei*) (*EN* I.9, 1100a4-9).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The translation used here is Apostle's (Apostle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics*, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Ostwald's translation, 1962, with some small modifications.

In this passage, Aristotle uses the suffering that Priam endures as an example of how a great misfortune can radically affect and alter (*metabolein*) the life of someone who seemed in every way of his life fully flourishing and happy. In fact, in the *Iliad* we find Priam praised for all those aspects of his life – his wisdom,<sup>4</sup> tremendous political power,<sup>5</sup> prosperity and his many children<sup>6</sup> – which are all important conditions for Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia* (*EN* I.8, 1099a31-1099b8). Most importantly, Aristotle must have considered Priam as an example of a virtuous person; otherwise he would not have described him within the context of a discussion on virtue and flourishing. For, in Aristotle’s language, only “activities in conformity with virtue constitute happiness” (*EN* I.10 1100b10). Yet, although a virtuous and flourishing person “will not be dislodged easily (*kinêthêsetai raidiôs*) from his happiness by any misfortune that comes along” (*EN* I.11, 1101a9-11) as Aristotle writes, there are exceptions. The case of Priam is so extreme that Aristotle admits that due to his misfortune, Priam can no longer be called a flourishing person. This means that although Aristotle maintains that the virtuous and flourishing person leads a stable life and is not easily moved and dislodged by misfortunes, there are limits to one’s endurance. The case of Priam shows that long-time wisdom, political power, prosperity and, most critically, virtue, can ultimately *not* protect us against extreme adversities.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle’s recognition of our vulnerability is significant for various reasons. In the first place it shows that Aristotle is very much aware of the fact that we, human beings, are in fact to be characterized by a fundamental lack<sup>8</sup>: our lives as they are lived are only complete when they are filled by others – in particular, those whom we consider our *friends*. As Books 8 and 9 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* make clear, a life of *eudaimonia* includes a life shared with friends – with friends as our staunchest critics, as mirrors to ourselves, and, poignantly put, as “second selves” whom we see as extensions of ourselves (*EN* IX.9, 1169b7, 1170b7). This dependence upon the other also implies that the loss of friends – in the case of King Priam, his dearest son – constitutes a loss of our own self and thus a threat to our flourishing. Secondly,

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hecuba’s address to Priam, Homer, *Iliad*, 24: 202.

<sup>5</sup> Achilles, in his speech to Priam, describes his political power as “expanding beyond the Hellespont” (Homer, *Iliad*, 24: 543-545).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 24:546.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kosman, 1992, p. 66.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, 1992, p. 182.

Aristotle's recognition of our vulnerability implies the recognition of the limits of his own conception of *eudaimonia*. In the face of tragic *pathos*, Aristotle maintains that the virtuous and flourishing person is resilient and can endure much without being moved away from his or her state of happiness. Nonetheless, the fact that extreme and recurrent adversity may lead to our destruction despite our worthiness to be happy signifies that Aristotle recognizes the limits of his theory regarding the power of virtue and admits the questionable nature of the relationship between virtue and happiness.<sup>9</sup> In other words, Aristotle recognizes suffering as that which threatens to destroy his conceptualization of the goal and purpose of human life.

In the second passage where Aristotle mentions Priam, we again see Aristotle struggle with the same theme of the fragility of happiness, but simultaneously establish that he is unwilling to give up entirely on the strength that human beings may possess in responding to misfortunes, as the following quote indicates:

For in our opinion, the man who is truly good and wise will bear with dignity whatever fortune may bring, and will always act as nobly as circumstances permit [...] If this is true, a happy man (*eudaimōn*) will never become miserable; but even so, supreme happiness (*makarios*) will not be his if a fate such as Priam's befalls him... (*EN* I.10, 1101a1-8)

The case of King Priam once again serves as an example of the overwhelming power that *pathos* may have. Aristotle argues that *pathos* may perhaps not make a flourishing person miserable due to his or her noble way of enduring and acting in these unfortunate circumstances, but this person can certainly not be said to be happy to the fullest extent, or blessed (*makarios*). The case of King Priam cited here also is explanatory of Aristotle's concept of endurance: for, despite his misery and helplessness, Priam finds the strength<sup>10</sup> – helped by Hermes – to visit Achilles in his camp and to plead for the release of the body of his son Hector. In order to provide him proper burial, Priam assembles all the strength he has, amidst all his misery and fear, and thus embodies exactly that which Aristotle indicates as “acting as nobly as circumstances

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kosman, 1992, p. 66.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. how Priam is addressed in this case – as having an “iron heart” (24: 521).

permit.” More strongly put, Priam’s actions remind us of the strength and resilience of virtue. In this regard, Priam is the embodiment of Aristotle’s idea that beauty and nobility shine through (*dialampeî to kalon*) (EN I.10, 1100b31-33) even in the most unfortunate circumstances.

### Part Two: Pity as Mediated Co-Suffering

In seeking the release of the body of his dead son Hector, Priam appeals to Achilles’ sense of pity. He closes his appeal to Achilles with the following words:

Respect the gods, Achilles.  
Think of your own father, and pity me.  
I am more pitiable. I have borne (*etlên*) what no man  
Who has walked this earth has ever yet borne.  
I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son.  
(Homer, *Iliad*, 24: 503-506).

In order to analyze Priam’s appeal to pity, Aristotle’s definition of pity proves useful. He writes:

Pity (*eleos*) may be defined as a feeling of pain (*lupê tis*) caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve (*anaksiou*) it, and which one might expect to suffer (*pathein*) oneself or one of one’s own (*tôn hautou*), and moreover when the suffering seems close to hand (*Rhetoric* II.8, 1385b13-16).<sup>11</sup>

Pity is for Aristotle a painful affect or *pathos* which includes the judgment that someone’s suffering is undeserved and thus unjust, and that this unjust suffering is something that either we ourselves or someone close to us could undergo in the near future. In this definition it is remarkable that pity is not classified among the virtues, but is an affect or *pathos*. This is in sharp contrast to our own contemporary tendency to count pity amongst the virtues,<sup>12</sup> which may be due to its association with

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<sup>11</sup> Translation Rhys Roberts (1984) modified.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sieveke, 1980, p. 245. Our modern, positive, interpretation of pity is mainly argued for in its association with concepts such as sympathy, compassion or mercy. Modern interpretations of pity are not solely positive, however. Some

concepts such as sympathy, compassion or mercy and our tendency to link pity and compassion to assisting others. Yet, for Aristotle, pity, qua affect, can only be *potentially* virtuous.<sup>13</sup>

When we use Aristotle's account of pity to understand Priam's appeal to pity, two crucial elements stand out. In the first place, Priam lays out before Achilles the great misfortune that has overcome him through no fault of his own, thereby illustrating Aristotle's point that the person to be pitied does not deserve his suffering. Secondly, for Aristotle, pity is felt when one comes to identify with the kind of undeserved suffering of another person as one that can happen "to oneself or one of one's own." In his address to Achilles, Priam invokes pity by asking Achilles to look upon him from the perspective of Achilles' father, who has been deprived of his son for a long time, is frail, and who is worried for his son's life. While Achilles' father Peleus may still hope that his son will return (although Achilles and Priam may know that Achilles is fated to die), all such hope is vain for Priam. Thus, by invoking the memory of Achilles' own father, Achilles is urged to see Priam not just as his enemy, but as a man and father who has suffered greatly – much more than Achilles' own father has in the absence of his son – and thus is worthy of pity.

The connection that Priam urges Achilles to make – to see him through the medium of his own father – is key to the act of invoking pity. Simultaneously, the use of Achilles' father as a medium brings to our attention the interesting distinction that Aristotle makes between unmediated co-suffering and the mediated experience of suffering that he calls pity. Aristotle writes in the *Rhetoric*:

The people for whom they feel pity are: those whom they know, unless they are very closely connected (*oikeiotêti*) to us

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interpreters argue that pity may deny the autonomous position of the person pitied, and entails a condescending attitude to the person being pitied (cf. Leighton, 2007, p. 101). Nietzsche's famous critique of pity is that pity multiplies suffering and drains strength from those who pity (*Antichrist*, §7).

<sup>13</sup> In another passage in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle draws a stronger conceptual connection between pity and virtue: in *Rhetoric* II.9, 1386b13, he writes that pity (just like indignation) is actually a sign of a good moral character (*êthous chrêstou*), since it indicates the keen observation of injustice.

– for in that case they relate to them as if they themselves are likely to suffer (*Rhetoric* II.8, 1386a17-18).<sup>14</sup>

In other words, according to Aristotle, one can only feel pity for those whom one knows, but who are at a distance from one.<sup>15</sup> Pity can never include compassion in the literal sense of the word, since *com-passion*, or *sym-paschō* to use the Greek, implies a “being-affected-together.”<sup>16</sup> In this context, it is worthwhile to notice that the Greeks used the term *sym-paschō* mainly for natural processes. For instance, Aristotle uses this term when he argues that it is better for the foot to be split into toes, because if it were unsplit, the entire foot would be affected if one part of it were harmed (*Parts of Animals*, IV.10, 690b4).<sup>17</sup> This understanding of *sym-paschō* which refers to a simultaneous, unmediated being-affected-together is helpful in order to analyze the above passage, because it seems that it is exactly this notion of *sym-paschō* that is implied when Aristotle speaks of our reaction towards those suffering who are extremely close to us. To indicate this closeness, Aristotle speaks of “close” in terms of “home,” using the Greek term *oikeios*. While the suffering of those close to us, i.e. those who are akin to us and find their origin in the same “home,” implies our own suffering, the suffering of others at a distance implies pity.

To illustrate this difference, we can make use of Aristotle’s example – the case of King Amasis<sup>18</sup> who did not weep when his son was led to his death, but did weep when he saw a, presumably distant, friend begging (*Rhet.* II.8, 1386a19-21). When the person who suffers is extremely close to us, the suffering of the other is directly related to us and, thus, our own. In Aristotle’s example, this explains the absence of tears in the case of the father. Instead of pitying, we suffer, according to Aristotle, the terrible (*deinos*) itself, which, in his words, “drives out (*ekkroutikon*) pity” (*Rhet.* II.8, 1386a22).

Of course, this raises the interesting issue of whether we *can* suffer the same as the other person. Is not someone’s pain fundamentally private and one’s own? Something similar to this question is also raised

<sup>14</sup> Translation Rhys Roberts (1984) modified.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Konstan, 2006, pp. 201-2. As Konstan points out, it is due to this distance that pity has been negatively interpreted as a “form of contempt.”

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Historisches Wörterbuch*, 1989, p. 752.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Historisches Wörterbuch*, 1989, p. 752, which cites the example of infectious yawning as another natural process of *sym-paschein*.

<sup>18</sup> This example originates with Herodotus’ *Histories* III.14.



in the *Nicomachean Ethics* when Aristotle asks how it is that the pain of suffering is alleviated by sharing the sorrow (*synalgountōn*) with friends:<sup>19</sup> is it because they actually share the burden (*barious metalambanousin*), or does the pain become less through the pleasant presence of one's friend? (*EN IX. 11,1171a30-32*). Unfortunately, Aristotle does not answer this question, but in his choice of words – which are built upon the Greek prefix *syn* – he emphasizes togetherness (*synalgō, syllupō*). Thus, Aristotle seems to suggest that close friends and family members *can* actually suffer the same. This, in turn, may be due to Aristotle's conception of friends as second selves (*EN IX.9, 1169b7, 1170b7*).<sup>20</sup>

For reason of their co-suffering, Aristotle writes in the *EN* that friends should protect friends from suffering along with them, as one should be reluctant to have friends “share in pain” (*syllupein, EN IX. 11,1171b8*). Said differently, the added burden of pain which occurs by seeing “an other [i.e. a friend] pained by our own misfortunes” (*EN IX. 11, 1171b5*) is to be prevented. Therefore, Aristotle thinks it is never appropriate to ask one's friends to commiserate with oneself. Nonetheless, this does not preclude that, from the other side, one should not actively seek to support a friend in suffering. In fact, it is more noble to do so without being asked, as Aristotle writes (*EN IX. 9, 1171b22*). Interestingly, we also find this notion of friends suffering together explicitly described in the opening of Book 24 of the *Iliad* when Homer addresses the loss that Achilles feels over his friend Patroclus, describing how Achilles commemorates “all they had done together, and the woes suffered together” (*tolypeuse syn autoi kai pathen algea*) (*Iliad 24: 7-8*). This indicates that the notion of doing and suffering *together* was, throughout the Greek world, crucial for their notion of (true) friendship.

After this detour to the co-suffering that close friends and family-members are capable of, we may find ourselves properly equipped to understand the kind of co-suffering that pity is. What it is not, as we saw in the above, is a direct being-affected-together. Rather, it assumes distance between the pitied and the one who pities. Nonetheless, pity can only be evoked if *somehow* that distance is bridged, while

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Konstan, 2001, p. 57-58 on friends participating mutually in events.

<sup>20</sup> What we do and what we suffer does not just originate in the self as we, moderns, have postulated it with our emphasis on independence and autonomy. Instead, what we do and what we suffer is for the Greeks very much a *happening* involving the self. I would thus want to argue that the Greek self is always a being-in-relation.

simultaneously keeping the distance between the pitied and the pitier intact. To cast it in my own terms: this almost paradoxical action can occur through not identifying with that person in particular, but by relating to the kind of person or to the kind of suffering that the person to be pitied undergoes. In short, I would like to argue that it appears that pity is *co-suffering to the second degree* – insofar as we understand and feel the other's pain through a particular medium, which makes the pain felt for the other person more universal and less particular.

In the case of Priam and Achilles, the pity that Priam asks for is provided through the connection with Achilles' father. After Priam has spoken, Homer describes the effects of his speech on Achilles in the following way:

So he spoke, and sorrow for his own father  
Welled up in Achilles. He took Priam's hand  
And gently pushed the old man away.  
The two of them remembered. Priam,  
Huddled in grief at Achilles' feet, cried  
And moaned softly for his man-slaying Hector.  
And Achilles cried for his father and  
For Patroclus. The sound filled the room.  
(Homer, *Iliad*, 24: 507-513).

In this scene, the paradoxical movement that is pity is beautifully illustrated by Achilles' actions: he first takes Priam's hand in his own hand, thereby showing closeness and intimacy, only to subsequently push Priam away, albeit gently – thereby demonstrating the need for distance. In addition, the scene describes the distance and solitude of suffering: each delves into his own memories and cries for the loss of the one close to him. Nonetheless, we may wonder – isn't there something in this scene that also illustrates these two men suffering together, or is what happens only co-suffering to the second degree? Thus we arrive at the final question of this paper: do Priam and Achilles ultimately *share* something in this moment – or do they, as strangers, recede into their own private worlds? If Aristotle's ideas on pity are correct, the distance between the two has to be preserved, but the question is: is there not something else or more than pity that emerges in their interaction?

Part Three: From Priam to Achilles: The Movement towards Friendship

Perhaps it is worthwhile here to backtrack, and remind ourselves how Priam precisely worded his mission to the Achaeans. Before he left, he prayed to Zeus, and asked that Zeus would send him to Achilles *welcome and pitied* (*philon elthein ēd' eleeinon*; 24: 309). Looking closely at the Greek, we can discern that Priam not only seeks pity from Achilles, but that he also wishes to be received as a *philon*, as someone dear, as a friend.<sup>21</sup> Thus, what Priam originally seeks from Achilles is not just pity, but also proximity and friendship. Can we find indications that this has been accomplished? To answer this question, we have to first look closely once again at the suffering of each and its causes: Priam's son Hector has killed Achilles' friend Patroclus, while Achilles has killed Priam's son Hector.

While their suffering is ultimately their own private suffering, their sufferings as such are also unmistakably interdependent and intertwined. This means that in crying for themselves, and the loss they have suffered, each of them is also involving the suffering of the other. Thus, no longer can there be question of merely pity for the other, for the pain that Achilles feels is to be directly linked to the pain that Priam feels. In this cross-linking of their pains, the relationship between Achilles and Priam seems to move beyond the simple pity that is experienced between non-intimates. As their sufferings are cross-linked, they are far closer to each other than one would originally surmise.

Thus, pity does only partial justice to describe the relationship between these two men. Yet, does that mean we could speak of their interaction as one that moves in the direction of friendship? A strong notion of friendship must be rejected at first sight. Although Priam may hope that he will be welcomed as someone dear, we also know that the distance between these two men is far too large to call them true friends – friends who see each other as “second selves.” Moreover, as Book 24 also shows, the relationship between the two remains precarious, as Priam's pressing appeal to Achilles, urging Achilles to allow him to bury his son as quickly as possible, is answered by Achilles' angry look and reply that Priam should not “provoke” him and further stir his grief as that might make Achilles harm the old man (24: 558-569). In response, Priam turns frightened (24: 571).

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<sup>21</sup> I owe this important reference of *philon* to P. C. Smith, 2002, p. 392

Nonetheless, we may wonder whether there are no signs in Book 24 of the *Iliad* that draw these men closer to each other, thereby perhaps not demonstrating friendship, but showing a movement towards friendship. The first such indication of proximity and friendship is to be found in the way Priam is described as lamenting the loss of his son Hector: Homer speaks of him as moaning for his “man-slaying Hector” (24: 511-512). It is important to note here that the epithet “man-slaying” is usually attributed to Achilles, thus indicating that in the scene where Achilles and Priam encounter each other, Priam identifies his son as Achilles-like. By appropriating Achilles’ epithet for his son, the distance between Priam and Achilles shortens, thereby allowing Priam to see Achilles as close and dear as his own son Hector. Vice versa, we could argue that something very similar to this happens to Achilles. In feeling sadness for the suffering of his father who still has a son, Achilles is also very much aware of the fact that his own father will soon have no son anymore. Thus, in crying for his own father, Achilles is also invoking the fate of the father who has recently undergone something very similar: Priam. Again this draws Achilles and Priam much closer than originally suspected and beyond the confinement of distance that mere pity seems to imply.

Another indication of a movement towards friendship between Priam and Achilles is found in Homer’s brief description of the scene of the two men sharing a meal (24: 601). The shared meal is highly symbolic of the growing closeness between Priam and Achilles. For it is through food – that which is symbolic for life and growth – that both men overcome their earlier states of hollowness. By eating together, they share in the forceful communion of life that eating is. By eating together, they share with each other in the pleasure of life. In sharing their pleasure, drawn from the same source, they connect to each other on a fundamental human level. Thus, while the scene of both men crying showed them both withdrawing into their own private worlds, the scene of both men enjoying food draws Priam and Achilles much more together.

After connecting to each other in eating, Homer subsequently describes the two men as enjoying a moment of reciprocal admiration, which brings out yet another aspect of their connection:

Then Priam, son of Dardanus, gazed for a while  
At Achilles, so big, so much like one of the gods,  
And Achilles returned his gaze, admiring  
Priam's face, his words echoing in his mind  
(Homer, *Iliad* 24: 629-632).

In this scene, Priam and Achilles feel admiration and wonder (*thaumadzō*) for each other. Their reciprocal wonder seems to take them away from their current context and draws them into a dreamlike vision: Priam comes to see Achilles in his idealized form<sup>22</sup> as “so much like one of the gods,” and Achilles comes to admire the noble face and words of Priam. The admiration for each other draws Priam and Achilles out of their own familiar frameworks, out of their miserable states, and into a state of recognition: a state of recognition where they do not merely see each other as ‘just’ human, but as extraordinary and almost divine. When they return each other’s glances, the world of private suffering has been left and what takes its place is a moment of pure, almost divine, shared, admiration.

This final moment of admiration shows us much: it shows that Priam and Achilles have moved beyond pity towards a new level of mutual recognition. By first sharing food together and subsequently admiring each other’s almost divine qualities, they have definitely moved beyond pity in the direction of friendship.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I am grateful to Mathilde Bruckner for drawing my attention to this particular moment of idealization taking place in Book 24.

<sup>23</sup> I would like to express my gratitude to Rosemarie Deist for organizing *The Passions of Achilles* and to all conference participants attending *The Passions of Achilles* for their helpful comments on the first version of this paper, in particular David Konstan and Mathilde Bruckner. In addition, a modified version of this paper benefited from critical comments I received at the 9<sup>th</sup> annual meeting of the Ancient Philosophy Society in Baltimore in 2009 and I am especially grateful to Michael Shaw for his engaging commentary. I am indebted to Gerard Kuperus for inspiring important changes in the manuscript at various stages of the process, and to Kristin Drake and Heather Fox for their editorial assistance.

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