

Does Homer doubt the existence of ghosts?

Iliad 23.103–104

MATTHEW W. DICKIE

Achilles, after the ghost of Patroclus flees his embrace, says: ὃ πόποι, ἦ ῥά τις ἐστὶ καὶ εἰν Ἄϊδαο δόμοισι ψυχῇ καὶ εἰδῶλον, ἀτὰρ φρένες οὐκ ἔνι πάμπαν (*Il.* 23.103–04).¹ His response might be paraphrased in English as: ‘Although there is after all even in death a spirit and a likeness, it utterly lacks intelligence’. The emphasis in the exclamation is, accordingly, on the lack of intelligence shown by the ghost of Patroclus. Achilles’ expression of recognition that there are ghosts after all is really just a foil to the true burden of what he wants to say, which is that he is frustrated and disappointed by the behaviour of the ghost in fleeing his embrace.² Even though the focus of what Achilles says is not on the existence of the spirits of the dead, it may still be worthwhile to take a closer look at the form of expression he uses when speaking of the continued existence of the spirits of the dead in the form of a likeness of the living person and related forms of expression. The question that I should like to address is what the existence of such forms of expression tells us about the attitudes of those who employed them and, more specifically, whether Achilles’ use of this way of speaking is some indication that in the world out of which the *Iliad* emerged not everyone was fully confident of the existence of ghosts.

The form of expression employed by Achilles is characteristically used in both Greek and Latin literature when portraying the response of persons on whom the truth of a proposition is borne home by circumstances. It is above all the existence or non-existence of the gods that such expressions are used to affirm.³ What generally prompts speakers to express themselves in this way is not a god showing himself clearly and palpably, or failing to do so, but an indication of the existence or non-existence of the gods in the form of a wrongdoer meeting with misfortune or virtue visited with good fortune or, on the other hand, wickedness flourishing or virtue suffering a catastrophe.

1 There is a case to be made for reading *τι* in *Il.* 23.103. It is found in some manuscripts instead of *τις*. Richardson 1993, 178 remarks that *τις* sits rather oddly with *εἰδῶλον* and cites as a parallel Pl. *Phd.* 63c5: *εὐελπίς εἰμι εἶναι τι τοῖς τετελευτηκόσι*. Latin has the same form of expression: *si sunt aliqu(uid) infer[i]* (*CIL* 6.3221.9). In Greek, the idea that there may be nothing after death is expressed with the neuter singular *οὐδέν* or *μηδέν*: *εἰ δὲ μηδέν ἐστι τελευτήσαντι* (Pl. *Phd.* 91b3); cf. Xen. *Cyr.* 8.7.17: *οὐ γὰρ δήπου τοῦτό γε εἰδέναι ὡς οὐδέν ἔτι ἐγὼ ἔσομαι, ἐπειδὴν τοῦ ἀνθρώπινου βίου τελευτήσω*.

2 Essentially the explanation of *Schol.* bT on Hom. *Il.* 23.104.

3 See Oakley 1998, 422–3 for a collection of instances.

Misfortune consequent on a failure to give the divine the honours it is due also leads to men openly acknowledging the existence of the gods.

Those who are moved to give immediate expression to their realization that the gods exist do so in the form of a simple declarative sentence in which the third person of the verbs εἶναι or *esse* is used.⁴ The second person may also be used.⁵ As for ghosts, there is only one other case in all of Greek and Latin literature, besides that in the *Iliad*, of a person being persuaded by events, again by the appearance of a ghost, to utter a declarative sentence acknowledging the existence of the spirits of the dead. This is Propertius' declaration that the spirits of the dead amount to something, made once he has been visited in his sleep by the spirit of his dead mistress Cynthia (Prop. 4.7.1). What he says is: *sunt aliquid manes*. It is generally assumed that Propertius finds the inspiration for Cynthia's visit in the episode in the *Iliad*. If that is the case, as it seems to be, Propertius 4.7.1 is not exactly an independent witness to the pattern of expression.

The simple declarative sentences in which a speaker, confronted by what he takes to be the truth of a proposition, acknowledges the truth, go hand in hand with sentences in which the proposition or the conditions taken to prove its truth are expressed as a hypothetical. The hypotheticals are, as it were, expressions of the doubt that those who voice their acknowledgment of the truth had hitherto entertained. Such sentences are used of the existence of the gods, of their interest in upholding justice on earth, then of the existence of ghosts, of the existence of intelligence on their part, and finally of the existence of a place that receives the spirits of the dead or of a special place in the underworld set aside for noble and pious spirits.⁶ So *sunt aliquid manes* has as its counterpart *si quae sunt manes* (CLE 2170.6) or *si qui estis manes* (CLE 132.1) or *si tamen at manes credimus esse aliquid* (CLE 1190.3) or *si sunt aliq[ui]d infer[i]* (CIL 6.3221.9), while *est caeleste numen; es, magne Iuppiter* (Livy 8.6.5) is matched by *si numina divum sunt aliquid* (Ov. *Met.* 6.542–3).

Expressions of the form 'if anything remains of us after death' or 'if there are spirits of the dead' are found predominantly in Latin verse-epitaphs of the Roman Empire.⁷ There is only one instance in Greek of a conditional sentence

4 Men. *Dys.* 639: εἰσιν θεοί, μὰ τὸν Διόνυσον. Cf. Alc. 1.34–6 PMG: ἄλαστα δὲ | ἔργα πάσον κακὰ μησαμένοι. ἔστι τις σιών τίσις. I owe the reference to J.G. Howie.

5 Hom. *Od.* 24.351–2: Ζεῦ πάτερ, ἦ ῥ' ἔτι ἔστε θεοὶ κατὰ μακρὸν Ὀλυμπον, | εἰ ἐτέον μνηστῆρες ἀτάσθαλον ὄβριον ἔτεισαν.

6 Existence of the gods: Ov. *Met.* 6.542–3; Sen. *Thy.* 404–07; concern of the gods with justice: Soph. *Phil.* 1035–6; Catull. 76.17–21; Verg. *Aen.* 1.603–05, 2.536–7, 689, 5.688–9; Ov. *Met.* 6.542–4. Cf. Ov. *Pont.* 2.9.21–6, *Tr.* 1.2.97–8.

7 CLE 130.1, 1057.15, 1190.3, 1323.1, 1328.3, 2146.1, 2170.6–7. There are besides Ov. *Am.* 3.59–60, *Met.* 6.543–5.

in this form.⁸ What Greek has are sentences of the form: ‘if the dead retain their powers of perception (αἴσθησις), then they will respond in such and such a way’.⁹ The form is copied in Latin, either more or less verbatim with *si superest aliquis post funera sensus* (Ov. *Pont.* 1.2.111) or with *si sapiunt quicquid post funera manes* (CLE 428.14) or some variation on it.

There are, in sum, a set of declarative sentences in which speakers give expression to their recognition of the existence of gods, because the conditions that, to their way of thinking, guarantee their existence have been fulfilled. Corresponding to these declarative sentences are the conditionals whose subject is the existence of the gods or the existence of any concern on their part for justice. Matching these declaratives and conditionals are the set of declaratives and conditionals whose subject is the existence of the spirits of the dead. The declarative utterances of those moved to acknowledge the existence of gods or ghosts have not engaged the attention of scholars interested in the religious beliefs of the ancients. It is quite another matter with the conditional sentences that are their formal counterparts. Some scholars have taken them to express a degree of reservation;¹⁰ others have asserted that they are no more than rhetorical devices for emphasizing the confidence the speaker feels in life after death.¹¹

Of the conditional sentences, it may be observed that without knowing what a speaker believed and what reservations he may have had we cannot say whether hypotheticals of the kind examined here should or should not be taken to be expressions of reservation. In the mouths of some speakers they may have been a standard and unthinking formula used in certain situations; others may have used them to express their reservations. Context in some instances makes it virtually certain that the speaker frames what he has to say as a hypothetical, just because he is not quite, or at all, certain about the matter. When the orator Hyperides says that if death is akin to not-existing, then the dead are free of the ills and misfortunes afflicting mankind, but if understanding persists into the House of Hades and if the gods feel concern, as people imagine they do, then the dead, because they have defended the honour of the divine, are likely to meet with the greatest consideration from the gods, it very much looks as if he puts what he says into a conditional form

8 Soph. *El.* 245–6: εἰ γὰρ ὁ μὲν θανάων γὰρ τε καὶ οὐδὲν ὄν | κείσεται τάλας.

9 Isoc. 9.2, 19.42; Hyp. 6.43; Dem. 19.66; 20.87; Lycurg. *Leocr.* 136; Philemon fr. 118 Kassel-Austin; [Pl.] *Menex.* 248b7; Aristid. *Or.* 3.440, 661 Lenz-Behr; *GVI* 231.4; Lib. 6.52, 9.52; Greg. *Naz. Or.* 4.4 (PG 35.532).

10 Cumont 1922, 18; Lattimore 1962, 59–61; doubt whether the dead perceive: Dover 1974, 243.

11 Brelich 1935, 78; Pascal 1923, 9–10.

because he feels he does not know what comes after death.¹² When Seneca in a consolatory letter says that there may perchance (*fortasse*), if what the wise maintain is true, be a place to which the deceased has gone on ahead and which he and his correspondent will soon reach, it is difficult to believe there is not an element of doubt in what is said, not only because of the qualification, *fortasse*, but also because, as a Stoic, Seneca can hardly have endorsed the idea of a place in the underworld to which the spirits of the dead departed.¹³ Again, the character in a fragment of New Comedy who says that if the dead really perceive, as some men say they do, gives the appearance of having grave reservations about the proposition.¹⁴ The writer of a consolatory letter to a father on the loss of his son displays a greater degree of confidence in the likelihood that the spirits of the virtuous have a special place in the underworld, by saying of the proposition he presents as a hypothetical that it is likely to be true (ὥσπερ εἰκὸς ἔχειν).¹⁵ The qualifying clause, nonetheless, shows that the speaker is hedging his bets.

Uttering a conditional sentence of the form under discussion creates, accordingly, something of a presumption of reservation; some speakers may try to dispel it and others may try to emphasize it. In the case of one particular sub-set of conditionals, those whose subject is consciousness after death, it is not difficult to imagine what gave rise to the apparent withholding of judgment inherent in their use. First of all, there is evidence that it was quite possible in a public forum to deny that men retained consciousness after death: Aeschines says without further ado to an Athenian jury in 346 BC that whoever is dead is unaware of the benefits conferred upon him in death.¹⁶ Demosthenes does not deny the possibility, but poses the possibility in a conditional sentence in such a way as to suggest it would be hard to credit.¹⁷ The picture of life after death that we find in Homer, of a shadowy existence devoid of understanding,

12 Hyp. 6.43. Cf. the two conditionals that Socrates employs in succession to each other at Pl. *Phd.* 91b2–7 εἰ μὲν τυγχάνει ἀληθῆ ὄντα ἃ λέγω, καλῶς δὲ ἔχει τὸ πεισθῆναι, εἰ δὲ μηδὲν ἔστι τελευτήσαντι ... He argues that if the latter proposition is true and not the former, then the misguided beliefs he had entertained about the existence of an afterlife will shortly perish with him. It follows that Socrates employs conditionals because he does not know what happens after death.

13 Sen. *Ep.* 63.16: *cogitemus ergo, Lucili carissime, cito nos eo perventurus quo illum pervenisse maeremus; et fortasse, si modo vera sapientium fama est recipitque nos locus aliquis, quem putamus perisse praemissus est.* For the collocation *fortasse si*, cf. Cic. *Brut.* 87, *De or.* 3.88, *Orat.* 40, *Fin.* 2.5, *Leg.* 3.29, *Att.* 15.12.2; [Quint.] *Decl. maior.* 5.14, 6.6.

14 Philemon fr. 118 Kassel-Austin εἰ ταῖς ἀληθείαισιν οἱ τεθνήκοτες | αἴσθησιν εἶχον, ἄνδρες ὡς φασὶν τινες.

15 [Plut.] *Cons. ad Apoll.* 120b. Cf. Hyp. 6.43: εἰ δ' ἔστιν αἴσθησις ἐν Ἄιδου καὶ ἐπιμέλεια παρὰ τοῦ δαίμονιου, ὥσπερ ὑπολαμβάνομεν, εἰκὸς τοὺς ταῖς τιμαῖς τῶν θεῶν βοηθήσαντας πλειστής κηδεμονίας ὑπὸ τοῦ δαίμονιου τυγχάνειν.

16 Aeschin. 1.14: τελευτήσαντα δὲ αὐτόν, ἡνίκα ὁ μὲν εὐεργετούμενος οὐκ αἰσθάνεται ὧν εὖ πάσχει.

17 Dem. 20.87.

should also be brought into the equation; it persists into later times: it is found in Euripides, possibly in Sophocles, and much later in Ovid.¹⁸ The belief that the dead lack understanding, although they may enjoy some other vestigial form of existence, may then be part of what lies behind the rather precise way in which the clause εἴ τις ἔστιν αἴσθησις τοῖς τελευτήσασιν and variations on it are framed.

I come finally to what inferences are to be drawn from declarative sentences sometimes being used in speaking of the existence of gods and ghosts, and sometimes hypotheticals. Men conspicuously did not, when faced with a table or a dog, feel moved to say: ‘There are dogs or tables after all’. Nor do they in their absence speak of their existence as hypothetical. That suggests that people did not feel the same way about the existence of gods and ghosts as they did about what they took to be brute physical realities. It would be a mistake to argue that such forms of expression reflect a deep-seated and widespread scepticism. These forms of expression do, on the other hand, seem to indicate that the confidence people felt in the existence of the divine and the spirits of the dead fell rather short of unquestioning certainty and that, in consequence, they were ready to welcome such proof as came their way of their existence and also to hedge their bets when they spoke of that existence and the form it took.

18 Hom. *Il.* 23.103–04, *Od.* 10.492–4; later evidence: Eur. fr. 532 (*Meleager*) Kannicht: τοὺς ζῶντας εὖ δρᾶν· κατθανόν δὲ πᾶς ἀνὴρ | γῆ καὶ σκία· τὸ μηδὲν εἰς οὐδὲν ῥέπει (cf. Soph. *El.* 245–6: εἰ γὰρ ὁ μὲν θανὼν γὰρ τε καὶ οὐδὲ ὄν | κείσεται τάλας); Ov. *Am.* 3.9.59–60: *si tamen e nobis aliquid nisi nomen et umbra / restat, in Elysia valle Tibullus erit.*

References

- Austin, Roland G. (1971) *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Primus with a commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brelich, Angelo. (1935) *Aspetti della morte nelle iscrizioni sepolcrali dell'impero Romano*. Budapest: Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum.
- Cumont, Franz. (1922) *Afterlife in Roman Paganism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dover, Kenneth J. (1974) *Greek Popular Morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Fordyce, Christian J. (1961) *Catullus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hubbard, Margaret. (1974) *Propertius*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hutchinson, Gregory. (2006) *Propertius, Elegies Book IV*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kassel, Rudolf. (1958) *Untersuchungen zur griechischen und römischen Konsolationsliteratur*. Munich: Beck.
- Kroll, Wilhem. (1989) *C. Valerius Catullus herausgegeben und erklärt*. Stuttgart: Teubner.
- Lattimore, Richmond A. (1962) *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lier, Bruno. (1904) 'Topica carminum sepulcralia latinorum'. *Philologus* 63: 54–65.
- Muecke, Frances. (1974) 'Nobilis historia? Incongruity in Propertius 4.7'. *BICS* 21: 124–32.
- Oakley, Stephen P. (1998) *A Commentary on Livy, Books VI–X*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pascal, Carlo. (1912) *Le credenze d'oltretomba nelle opere letterarie dell'antichità classica*. Turin: Paravia.
- Richardson, Nicholas J. (1993) *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume VI Books 21–24*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yardley, John C. (1977) 'Cynthia's Ghost: Propertius 4.7 again'. *BICS* 24: 83–7.