

## Θυμός and Ψυχή as Sympathetic and Parasympathetic Arousal in the Homeric Poems

Scholars have long recognized that ψυχή in Homer neither plays any role in emotion nor refers to the inner self, but signifies the dying breath and sometimes the entity that survives in Hades, while many cognitive and emotional functions are taken over by faculties like θυμός, φρένες, νόος, and μένος. Scholars like Jan Bremmer (1983), arguing for a dualistic concept of a “free soul” (ψυχή) and “body souls” (θυμός, νόος, μένος), and Michael Clarke (1999), who emphasizes that the Homeric person is an organic unity powered by the mixing of wind and fluids inside the chest, stress the connection of both θυμός and ψυχή with breathing in Homeric diction. Further, they suggest that the etymological connections of the former with words for heat, smoke, and wind (θύω, θυσία, θύελλα) and the latter with words for blowing or cooling and cold (ψύχω, ψύχος, ψυχρός) make them appropriate descriptors of physical and mental activity, agitation, and emotion and the extreme inactivity of death respectively. Yet there is still little agreement on what exactly these words signify.

Guillemette Bolens (2000: 19-59) argues that Homer has a coherent concept of the body and mind and suggests that θυμός is a sensory apparatus that becomes aware of interoceptive and proprioceptive sensation. Brooke Holmes (2010: 41-83) understands the Homeric person from the perspectives of both the “seen” physical body and the “felt” individual self and suggests that words like θυμός are based on a culturally specific feeling of embodiment while arguing that divine agency can permeate both fields of the person to cause injury or disease. Andreas Zanker (2019: 165-200) agrees with Clarke that the Homeric narrator describes mental activity in terms of the mixing of wind and liquid, but argues that this is a culturally determined conceptual metaphor where the “target domain” of the abstract concept of thought is understood using

concrete images from a familiar “source domain” of the movement and change of wind and weather.

In this paper, I push these suggestions even further by arguing that behind the words ψυχή and θυμός lie conceptual metaphors that imagine life as heat and death as cold (Lakoff and Turner 1989: 1-56), and further that the subjective “felt” experience and distinctive breathing patterns of the two extremes of autonomic arousal inspire these conceptual metaphors. The sympathetic arm of the autonomic nervous system is the “fight, flight, freeze” system that promotes mental focus and physical movement and is characterized by fast and frequent breaths with fuller inhalations and warmer body temperatures. The parasympathetic arm is the “rest and digest” system and is typically characterized by long, slow breaths with fuller and more frequent exhalations and lower body temperatures (Nestor 2020: 143-145). Thus, early Greeks may have perceived sympathetic arousal as the “hot” mode and the smoky θυμός could have signified what we might call the self in a state of sympathetic arousal while the cold ψυχή may have signified the “cold” mode that we might call the self in a state of parasympathetic arousal.

This may help explain why both ψυχή and θυμός are said to leave the body at death. In many of the passages where the θυμός leaves the body, the person dies suddenly in the heat of battle when they are clearly in “fight or flight” mode. For instance, Elephenor tries to strip the body of Echeolus, but his “rapid motion forward became short lived” (μίνυνθα δέ οι γένεθ’ ὀρμή) when Agenor wounded him with a spear and “his spirit left him” (τὸν μὲν λίπε θυμός, *Il.* 4. 466, 470). However, in two of the most prominent passages where ψυχή leaves the body, Patroclus and Hector both meet their end when they are already exhausted and weak (ὀλιγοδρανέων, *Il.* 16.843≈22.337), likely slipping into a state of parasympathetic rest and

recovery even before their “soul flew away from the limbs and went to Hades” (ψυχή δ’ ἐκ ῥεθέων Ἄϊδόσδε βεβήκει, *Il.* 16.856=22.362).

#### Works Cited

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