

# “On a Razor’s Edge” (*Il.* 10.173): Iliadic Images of Imbalance and Uncertainty

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**I**N *ILLIAD* 10 old Nestor illustrates the dire straits of the Greeks and the precariousness of their cause with the metaphor of the “razor’s edge” (10.173–174):<sup>1</sup>

νῦν γὰρ δὴ πάντεσσιν ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἴσταται ἀκμῆς  
ἢ μάλα λυγρὸς ὄλεθρος Ἀχαιοῖς ἢ ἐ βιῶναι.

for matters now stand upon a razor’s edge for all of us:  
either an exceedingly miserable death for the Achaeans or  
survival.

The scholia on the expression first offer (1) another image to illustrate the meaning of the Homeric phrase before the scholiast attempts (2) a periphrasis of its meaning (D schol. ad *Il.* 10.173):<sup>2</sup>

ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἴσταται ἀκμῆς· ἀντὶ τοῦ (1) τὰ πράγματα ἡμῶν τριχὸς  
ἦρτηται, ὅ ἐστιν (2) ἐν ἐσχάτῳ κινδύνῳ. ἔστιν καὶ ἐπὶ ὀξύτητος  
τοῦ κινδύνου μεταφορικῶς.

“it stands on a razor’s edge”: instead of (1) “our matters hang by a thread (lit. a hair),” viz. (2) they are in utmost danger and on the cusp of danger, metaphorically speaking.

<sup>1</sup> Text: H. van Thiel, *Homeri Ilias*<sup>2</sup> (Hildesheim 2010); transl. (with minor adaptations) A. Verity, *Homer, The Iliad* (Oxford 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Text, D scholia: H. van Thiel, *Scholia D in Iliadem*<sup>2</sup> (Cologne 2014), available online at <https://kups.ub.uni-koeln.de/5586/1/vanthiel.pdf>; A and bT scholia: H. Erbse, *Scholia Graeca in Homeri Iliadem I–VII* (Berlin 1969–1988); translations are my own.

The phrase does not occur anywhere else in extant Homeric or Hesiodic poetry, but to judge from its repeated occurrence in later Greek literature,<sup>3</sup> the expression ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἀκμῆς, “on the edge (ἀκμή) of the razor (ξυρόν)” appears to be (or to have become) proverbial: since *Il.* 10.173 is the only occurrence in extant archaic epic, i.e. the Homeric and Hesiodic poems as well as the Homeric hymns, we have no way to ascertain whether the phrase was formulaic<sup>4</sup> or proverbial already at the time of its first attestation.

Its meaning is immediately apparent to modern readers because the imagery is still familiar in English as the “razor’s edge” (or sometimes “knife’s edge,” also cf. the existence of the proverbial phrase in other modern languages such as German “auf Messers Schneide stehen,” Spanish “estar en el filo de la navaja,” or French “être sur le fil du rasoir”—which all likely hark back to the Homeric expression).

Though its meaning is immediately apparent, the details of the Greek expression are not entirely clear: the grammatical form in which the two options for the Greeks are given is peculiar, as was noted by one Homeric scholar commenting on

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Thgn. 557; Simon. *Anth.Gr.* 7.250.1; Soph. *Ant.* 996; Eur. *HF* 630; Hdt. 6.11.2; Theoc. *Id.* 22.6; Anon. *Anth.Gr.* 9.475.2.

<sup>4</sup> The extent to which the Homeric epics are formulaic is a matter of debate, but in my understanding of formulaic I follow M. Finkelberg, “Formulaic and Nonformulaic Elements in Homer,” *CP* 84 (1989) 179–197, at 181: “I count as formulaic any expression that occurs at least twice in Homer or any unique expression that represents a modification of a recognizable formulaic pattern.” In light of our limited material, this seems an appropriate concretization of the definition in M. Parry, *L’épithète traditionnelle dans Homère: Essai sur un problème de style homérique* (Paris 1928); quoted from the translation *The Traditional Epithet in Homer in The Making of Homeric Verse. The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. A. Parry (Oxford 1971) 1–190, at 13: “In the diction of bardic poetry, the formula can be defined as an expression regularly used, under the same metrical conditions, to express an essential idea.”

the passage.<sup>5</sup> Also, the conceptualizations underlying the phrasing, i.e. why it means what it does, have not been explained sufficiently.<sup>6</sup> The expression ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἴσταται ἀκμῆς “it stands on a razor’s edge” is certainly a metaphor, as was already noted by the scholiasts (μεταφορικῶς in D schol. ad *Il.* 10.173, T schol. ad 10.173a<sup>1</sup>).

In light of current cognitive linguistic approaches to metaphor, which view metaphor more as a ‘figure of thought’ than a mere figure of speech (conceptual metaphor theory, or CMT),<sup>7</sup> it makes sense to examine the basic conceptions and ideas informing this expression and how it relates to other metaphors. The notion that originally gave rise to the image was likely that anything balanced on an edge so thin and sharp as that of a razor is in such a precarious and unstable state that it must certainly soon fall to one side or the other.<sup>8</sup> Interest-

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. B. Hainsworth, *The Iliad: A Commentary* III (Cambridge 1993) 171 ad *Il.* 10.173–174: “ἐπὶ ξυροῦ: the first occurrence of what became a very common metaphor for crisis. As with scales (8.69 = 22.209, 12.433) the metaphor is from the uncertainty of balance. The construction of ἴσταται, which should be impersonal, ὄλεθρος, and the infinitive βιώναι is curious, but the sense is perfectly clear.”

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also the assessment of A. T. Zanker, *Metaphor in Homer: Time, Speech, and Thought* (Cambridge 2019) 205 (who does not discuss this particular metaphor, as it is outside the scope of his study of metaphors of time, speech, and thought): “We also need to investigate further conceptual metaphors—for example those that structure Homeric causality and morality. What motivates the metaphor of the scales of Zeus, or the metaphor of the razor used by Nestor in *Iliad* 10?”

<sup>7</sup> For the general theory of conceptual metaphors see the seminal works G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Amsterdam 1980); G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago 1989); and G. Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” in A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1993) 202–251. For the most substantial application to date of this approach to the Homeric poems see Zanker, *Metaphor in Homer*.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. e.g. W. Leaf, *Homer: The Iliad* I<sup>2</sup> (London 1900) 437 ad loc.

ingly, the consideration that something balanced on a sharp edge is in immediate danger of being cut (and hence potentially injured or destroyed), does not feature in the metaphor, or at least appears not to be the primary focus of the image: while the metaphor of the ‘razor blade’ might provide an added connotation of danger, the main point of the image is obviously that the state of the balanced object is precarious and the decision to which side it will fall irreversibly is imminent. According to the internal logic of the image, both possible outcomes of the situation are metaphorically represented by the two sides of the razor blade, and the metaphor is therefore apt to illustrate a crucial choice between two diametrically opposed options: in 10.174, ἢ μάλα λυγρὸς ὄλεθρος ... ἢ βιῶναι, “either a very miserable death or to live.” (According to its etymology as a formation of the root *\*h<sub>2</sub>ek-* > ἄκ- ‘point, sharp’,<sup>9</sup> ἄκμή could theoretically also refer to the tip of the blade,<sup>10</sup> but this does not fit well with the image, which requires a choice between two clearly distinguished options; furthermore, it is not clear if what Greek termed a ξυρόν, ‘razor’, i.e. a tool for shaving,<sup>11</sup> would have had a point.)

As such, the metaphor can first and foremost be related to Zeus’s scales, another image which represents an impending ‘decision’ between two possible outcomes, also based on the

<sup>9</sup> Cf. H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I–II (Heidelberg 1960–1970) I 53–54 s.v. ἄκμή; P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris 1968) 43–45 s.v. ἄκ-; R. S. P. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* I–II (Leiden 2010) I 52 s.v. ἄκμή.

<sup>10</sup> Erasmus of Rotterdam seems to have considered both possibilities in his *Adagia* (1536), section 1.1.18: “Ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἄκμῆς, id est In novaculae cuspide sive acie, pro eo, quod est: in summo discrimine.” He then proceeds to translate the Homeric occurrence: “sita res in cuspide ferri est.”

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* II 340 s.v. ξυρόν, and Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary* II 1038–1039 s.v. ξυρόν. For its relation to ξύω, ‘scrape, abrade, shave, polish’, see also Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 768–769 s.v. ξύω.

conceptualization UNCERTAINTY IS (PHYSICAL) IMBALANCE.<sup>12</sup> Although the scenes of Zeus’s cosmic scales are *sensu stricto* not metaphorical, since the weighing appears to occur literally in the course of the epic narrative, the images share the notion of shifting balance as an indication of uncertainty about the outcome of the current situation:

*Il.* 8.69–74

καί τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατήρ ἐτίταινε τάλαντα·  
 ἐν δ’ ἐτίθει δύο κῆρε ταηλεγέος θανάτοιο  
 Τρώων θ’ ἵπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,  
 ἔλκε δὲ μέσσα λαβῶν· ῥέπε δ’ αἴσιμον ἦμαρ Ἀχαιῶν.  
 αἶ μὲν Ἀχαιῶν κῆρες ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ  
 ἔξέσθην, Τρώων δὲ πρὸς οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἄερθεν.  
 then indeed father Zeus held up his golden scales,  
 and in them he placed two specters of death, the bringer of long  
 misery,  
 one of the horse-breaking Trojans and one of the bronze-shirted  
 Achaeans.  
 Taking the bar by the center he lifted it up, and the Achaeans’  
 destined day sank down;  
 their specters settled on the earth that nourishes many,  
 while the Trojans’ leapt up to the broad sky.

*Il.* 22.209–213

καί τότε δὴ χρύσεια πατήρ ἐτίταινε τάλαντα·  
 ἐν δ’ ἐτίθει δύο κῆρε ταηλεγέος θανάτοιο,  
 τὴν μὲν Ἀχιλλῆος, τὴν δὲ Ἑκτορος ἵπποδάμοιο.  
 ἔλκε δὲ μέσσα λαβῶν· ῥέπε δ’ Ἑκτορος αἴσιμον ἦμαρ,  
 ὄχετο δ’ εἰς Αἶδαο·  
 then indeed father Zeus held up his golden scales,  
 and in them he placed two specters of death, the bringer of long  
 misery,  
 one for Achilles and one for Hector, breaker of horses.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the comments of Hainsworth as well as Zanker’s (nn.4 and 5 above), who both take the two images together. I use the convention of cognitive linguistics to print conceptual metaphors (as opposed to linguistic, or textual, metaphors) in small capitals in order to indicate that they do not appear as such in texts but are deduced from individual textual metaphors.

Taking the bar by the center he lifted it up, and Hector's fated  
 day sank down;  
 it went to Hades;

The comparison of the metaphor in 10.173, ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἴσταται ἄκμῆς, with the two weighing scenes in *Iliad* 8 and 22 points to crucial differences in the images. The scales of Zeus do not only employ the physical notion of imbalance as a symbol for uncertainty about the immediate future but their meaning is also informed by the general coordinate orientational metaphors UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD.<sup>13</sup> The pair of scales affords an ideal image to illustrate the correlation of the fates of the opponents (also note the dual δύο κῆρε in 8.70/22.210),<sup>14</sup> that the loss/decline of one side necessarily means the success/ascent of the opposite side, which is “lifted to the broad sky” by their enemies’ misfortune (8.74 πρὸς οὐρανὸν εὐρὸν ἄερθεν). The “sinking down of the fated day” (8.72/22.212 ῥέπε δ’ αἴσιμον ἦμαρ) indicates that death and doom are imminent, with ‘down’ denoting the direction towards the ground to which mortally wounded warriors fall (compare 8.73–74 ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρη / ἐξέσθην with the description of death in 8.277/12.194/16.418 πέλασε χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρη, “he brought them down to the earth that nourishes many”) and also the direction

<sup>13</sup> On the theoretical basis and the idea of orientational metaphors see esp. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 14–21. As an example of the existence of the conceptualization GOOD IS UP (and the logically coordinate notion BAD IS DOWN) it will be sufficient to remember the famous phrasing of *Il.* 6.208/11.784, αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων, where excellence and superiority are conceptualized through the directionality UP (or ABOVE) of ὑπε(ι)ρ-. For this basic meaning of the adv./prep. see Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* II 966–967 s.v. ὑπερ, ὑπερ; Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 1157 s.v. ὑπερ, ὑπερ; Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary* II 1533 s.v. ὑπερ. Though there might be isolated linguistic expressions to the contrary, the coordinate orientational metaphor UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD seems to be a default setting of the human conceptual system.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also the simile of the balanced scales at *Il.* 12.432–436 to illustrate that Greeks and Trojans are evenly matched.

towards the underworld (cf. 22.213 ὄχρετο δ’ εἰς Αἴδαο).<sup>15</sup> When scales are used as an instrument for measuring, they need to be balanced exactly to provide a precise statement about weight, but this is not the case in this image. They are employed by Zeus as an instrument of immutable fate (metaphorically expressed through the laws of physics) to determine the outcome of a conflict which he himself is unable to prevent.<sup>16</sup>

As such, the meaning of the image of the scales of Zeus fundamentally depends on the coordinate metaphorical conceptualizations UP IS GOOD/DOWN IS BAD rather than any actual process of weighing to express the defeat of the party fated to die as a sinking down, since the source domain of weighing does not supply the inference that the side weighed down is inferior, which in these cases means doomed and bound to lose in the coming battle. (On the contrary, following commonsense experience the heavier side of a pair of scales that moves down will usually hold more weight and content and thus be considered more desirable; cf. the common conceptual metaphor MORE IS BETTER.) In this regard, the image of the scales and their downward motion to indicate the negative outcome is probably also informed by the notion that the conceptual domain of HEAVINESS is associated not only with physical weight but also metaphorically with psychological/emotional stress and op-

<sup>15</sup> On the directionality of many expressions of death in the *Iliad* see F. Horn, “Dying is Hard to Describe: Metonymies and Metaphors of Death in the *Iliad*,” *CQ* 68 (2018) 359–383, esp. 363, 371–372.

<sup>16</sup> Note that the scales do not function as a means of deciding fate, only as an illustration or symbol of the fated events of which even the gods are uncertain and which they are unable to influence. Also see Ch. Voigt, *Überlegung und Entscheidung: Studien zur Selbstauffassung des Menschen bei Homer* (Berlin 1934; rev. Meisenheim am Glan 1972) 85: “Es sieht so aus, als sei die Wage (sic) nur dazu da, die Vollstreckung des eben Beschlossenen zu symbolisieren,—dann darf man aber nicht darüber nachdenken, wie schlecht gerade das Bild der Wage dafür paßt; denn beim Wägen entscheidet doch die Sache, die gewogen wird, und nicht der Wägende.”

pression: e.g. the collocation βαρὺ/βαρέα στενάχειν, “to sigh heavily,”<sup>17</sup> and other instances of βαρῦς<sup>18</sup> indicating grief.<sup>19</sup> Yet even though the movement of the scales can be thought to have been brought about by greater ‘heaviness’ of one side (and what this metaphorically entails), what is meaningful in the image are the correlated UPWARD and DOWNWARD trajectories.

In contrast, the occurrence of both the good and the bad options are metaphorically represented as a ‘falling down’ in the image of the razor’s edge with the directionality DOWN implicit in the use of the preposition ἐπί, lit. ‘on’,<sup>20</sup> with the genitive.<sup>21</sup> The consideration that both the positive and the negative outcome are represented by ‘falling’, i.e. a downward directionality, which has by default a negative connotation, is suppressed and does not feature in the metaphorical image. Hence the main feature expressed by the metaphor of the razor’s edge is the instability of the current state which will immediately be resolved one way or the other, with the fall down

<sup>17</sup> *Il.* 1.364; 4.153; 8.334; 9.16; 13.423, 538; 14.432; 16.20; 18.70, 78, 323; 23.60; *Od.* 4.516; 5.420; 8.95, 534; 10.76; 23.317.

<sup>18</sup> For the basic meaning ‘heavy’ see Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* I 221–222; Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 165–166; Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary* I 202.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. e.g. *Il.* 5.417, 10.71, 20.55; Hes. *Theog.* 615, *Op.* 16, 215–216.

<sup>20</sup> See Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 358; Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary* I 440.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. G. C. Horrocks, *Space and Time in Homer: Prepositional and Adverbial Particles in the Greek Epic* (New York 1981) 194: “ἐπί may also be used with a following genitive to express location. Since this is clearly not an ablative genitive (realising SOURCE), it must be an original (partitive) genitive expressing the fact that one object is located at some part of another object viewed as the surface (= ‘somewhere on x’).” Hence ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἀκμῆς could be explained as ‘(sc. balanced) somewhere on top of a razor blade’, with the downward trajectory naturally implicit through the laws of physics in the balanced object’s potential for falling off.



from the edge representing the decisiveness and irreversibility of the coming events. This is also the aspect that the scholiast chose to focus on when he provided another image as a synonym: the phrase “it hangs by a hair” (τριχὸς ἤρτηται; cf. the English idiom “hang by a thread,” or the German “am seidenen Faden hängen”) also evokes a situation of insecurity that cannot be recovered once it has been decided, with the decision also represented metaphorically by a drop when the suspending hair breaks (without any loss of balance or drawing on the source domain of PHYSICAL BALANCE).

In conclusion, through the conceptual metaphor PHYSICAL IMBALANCE IS UNCERTAINTY, the images of the razor’s edge (ξυροῦ ἀκμῆ) and the cosmic scales of Zeus (χρῦσεια τάλαντα) refer to similar situations of precariousness between two possible outcomes, but they emphasize (or ‘highlight’) different aspects<sup>22</sup> that can be revealed by a careful examination of the experiential bases of the two images.<sup>23</sup> In this regard, CMT is a helpful theoretical framework because it allows us to subsume the two images under a common conceptualization but then consider the different nuances of their concrete source domains as well as how they are informed by other conceptualizations (such as orientational metaphors). Both images appear well suited to their narrative environments, which shows that even though they might belong to the traditional epic repertoire they were chosen by the poet with a regard for their respective contexts. The imagery of the pair of scales and the experience of weighing two objects against one another serves to stress the two-sidedness of the conflicts and to contrast the defeat (and death) of the inferior party with the victory and success of the

<sup>22</sup> On the potential of metaphors to highlight (or hide) certain aspects of the target domain see Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 10–13.

<sup>23</sup> On the notion of an experiential basis of metaphors, i.e. the idea that the understanding of abstract domains is constructed using more basic experiential knowledge acquired directly, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* 77–86.

opponent. Indeed, the important feature of the (at least temporary) success of the Trojans in *Iliad* 8 is that it entails a setback of the Greek cause (according to the plan of Zeus to honor Achilles), just as the death of Hector in *Iliad* 22 signifies the successful revenge and the ultimate triumph of Achilles. Additionally, the scales are subjected to the laws of nature (in this case the laws of physics) and thus serve as an apt illustration of the inevitability of fate, since the outcome of the ‘weighing of the fates’ cannot be influenced or changed even by Zeus. On the other hand, the metaphor of the razor’s edge in *Iliad* 10 puts the focus on the precariousness and danger of the current situation, an impression that is likely compounded by the use of ἀκμῆ to indicate sharpness<sup>24</sup> (cf. Lat. *acies*, or the notion of the razor blade to signal the potential of injury or death). Additionally it draws attention to the imminence of a decisive resolution and its irreversible effect. As such, the metaphor is fitting for the communicative purpose of the speech in which it is employed by Nestor (10.169–176), since it is designed to impress the urgency of the Greeks’ plight on his addressee, Diomedes, and thus prepares him to take action and volunteer for the nocturnal spying mission to the Trojan camp later proposed by Nestor (10.203–222).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For this additional consideration also see T schol. ad *Il.* 10.173b: ἐπὶ ξυροῦ ἴσταται ἀκμῆς: καὶ διὰ τὸ ὄξυ καὶ διὰ τὸ λεπτὸν επικίνδυνον τοῦτο, “‘it stands on razor’s edge’ [means] it is dangerous and precarious because of the sharpness and the thinness (sc. of the razor blade).” Erasmus’ Latin periphrasis in *Adagia* 1.1.18, “in summo discrimine,” also conveys the notions of both the immediacy and the critical nature of the decision.

<sup>25</sup> I owe a debt of gratitude to the anonymous *GRBS* reviewers for providing supportive and insightful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article, which were helpful in phrasing and presenting the argument more cogently. All remaining mistakes and imprecisions are, of course, my own.