

2. Practical Intellect and Contemplative Mind in Early Greek Epos

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Abstract: This article offers observations on the origins of the fundamental philosophical notions of intellect, mind, and imagination in the earliest Greek literary texts. Homer, Hesiod, and the various anonymous authors of their era employ intricate and nuanced terminology to describe the human capacity to mentally and emotionally assess the world, process information, plan and develop strategies to achieve desired outcomes, and act in accordance with social expectations and situational demands. We argue that this terminology is coherent and reflects a well-developed conceptual system, though one that may appear somewhat alien to modern specialists in ancient philosophy.

This elaborate conceptual system underwent significant transformation in subsequent centuries, mirroring the social and intellectual changes of the Greek world; indeed, some of its aspects were so foreign to the Classical period that Aristotle felt compelled to explain them in the *Metaphysics*. Nevertheless, the “Homeric” worldview paved the way for the development of classical philosophy, and a more precise understanding of that worldview is crucial for tracing the evolution of human thought and the continuum of European philosophy. Behind the tranquil contemplation of the Platonic *nous*, we can still overhear the distant echoes of Achilles’ and Agamemnon’s bloodthirsty voices, of the wily advice of Odysseus, and perhaps of the thunderous behest of Zeus.

Keywords: *mētis*, *noos*, intellect, mind, Homer, Hesiod, cunning, early Greek thought

Introduction

A continual transition between mythology and rationality, poetry and philosophy marks the history of ancient culture and thought.¹ *Mythos* (the collectively sacralized view of the world) and *logos* (the conscious pursuit of intellectually attainable truth) alternate between conflict, co-existence, and synthesis, much like the Titans and the Olympian gods, or the symbolic “marriage” of Mercury and Philology in Martianus Capella. These shifts are gradual rather than revolutionary: each new phase incorporates elements of the previous one, as in the evolutionary transitions between archaeological ages. Mythological thinking, therefore, does not disappear with the rise of new political forms or philosophical paradigms in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE but is absorbed into new modes of self-understanding, continuing to delineate the limits of human rationality and gesture toward forms of knowledge accessible only intuitively or noetically.

This constant interplay between intuition and rationalization also provides the proper framework for approaching the complex terminology of perception and intellect in antiquity. As we will see, in the early, poetic-mythological phase of Greek culture, Homer and Hesiod introduced concepts such as *mētis*, *noos*, and *thymos*, but, along with their derivatives, these terms do not align with contemporary distinctions between reason and emotion and pose significant difficulties for modern interpretation. As Boban Dedović’s innovative psycholinguistic study has shown, there are substantial differences in both the quantity of “mental” vocabulary and the semantic structure of the conceptual systems of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the latter being markedly richer in this respect. Moreover, the meanings of these terms often appear alien even to later Greek philosophical systems. Plato’s tripartite theory of the soul, formulated nearly half a millennium after Homer, can itself be misleading, since it deliberately operates with a different conceptual vocabulary. At the same time, Aristotle treats the archaic (that is, Homeric) conception of the soul as a cognitive organ, analogous to the sense organs, as a notion requiring explanation for his audience.² For this reason, we frequently struggle to translate such terms in a way that does justice to their context, since they may en-

¹ See Radi Radev, *Ancient Philosophy*, in *Ancient Philolosophy* (Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 1988), p. 10 [in Bulgarian].

² Aristotle, *De anima*, ed. William Ross, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, 427a.17-27.

compass a wide range of meanings: modes of understanding and sensing the world, acts of will or desire, the avoidance or pursuit of action, the formulation of plans, and the giving of counsel.

Despite the variability of epic terminology for intellectual activity, two broadly distinguishable semantic fields emerge, each with a divergent later history. The first concerns situational judgment, adaptive problem-solving, and persuasive effectiveness; to avoid confusion with Kantian “practical reason,”³ this mode may be termed **practical intellect**. This translation of the ancient term *mētis* and its adjectival formations (*ankylomētis*, *poikilomētis*, *polymētis*), whose various meanings emphasize flexibility, inventiveness, and responsiveness to changing circumstances, avoids the pejorative connotation of Detienne and Vernant’s “cunning intelligence”. Accordingly, its archetypal bearer, Odysseus, is described through epithets such as *polytropos*, underscoring multiplicity and adaptability. Precisely because this form of intelligence is immanent to the mutable realm of becoming, later opposed by Plato to the stability of the intelligible, it and the rhetorical practices associated with it are repeatedly subjected to ethical suspicion: charged with manipulation, inconstancy, self-interest, and corporeality, in contrast to the philosopher’s disembodied contemplative intellect (*noos*). These unfavorable valuations persist and intensify in Christian discourse, where many of the same attributes are ultimately transferred to the Devil and his demons.

In contrast to pragmatic, tactically oriented intelligence (*mētis*), which is rational and directed toward the effective selection of means to achieve a given end, the second semantic field centers on perception; in early epic poetry, this capacity is designated *noos* (or *nous* in Classical Greek). It denotes the faculty through which gods and humans apprehend, integrate, and interpret sequences of events. For Homer and He-

³ When discussing epic *mētis* and related forms of situational intelligence, it is essential to avoid anachronism. These concepts should not be equated with practical reason in the Kantian sense, since for Kant *die praktische Vernunft* is necessarily governed by imperative rules grounded in norms established by pure reason (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 18), and practical reason itself functions as an extension of the latter, achieving its fullest expression when “a practical law... qualifies for a giving of universal law” (Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 25). By contrast, practical intellect—and its divine patron Metis—serves the realization of individual aims in specific situations rather than the application of abstract ethical laws.

siod, it paradoxically encompasses not only cognition but also non-excessive emotions, imagination, and inductive reasoning—so that in specific contexts it may be rendered as “intuition.” Although the mythopoetic phase of Greek culture displays only the rudiments of abstract thought, the closely associated *noos*, associated with vision and imagination, will provide the conceptual basis for what later authors would articulate as contemplative or abstract intellect, increasingly opposed to practical wisdom.

Taken together, the divergent trajectories of *mētis* and *nous* illuminate a central tension in Greek intellectual history. Practical intellect was initially embedded in the divine through its personification as the goddess Metis, but gradually lost its sacral status and was reduced to a useful, situational skill, while *nous*, increasingly abstracted and conceptually elaborated, ascended toward the realm of philosophical reflection and ultimately gained a complex theological meaning. From the interplay of these two modes of cognition emerges the Greek conception of reason itself, a polarized intellectual landscape oscillating between pragmatic ingenuity and the anti-utilitarian ideal of “pure” philosophical contemplation—articulated in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* as *sophia* in its fullest sense⁴.

***Metis* and *Metis*: practical intellect in Homer and Hesiod**

Etymologically, the term *mētis* derives from the Indo-European root *meh₁- (“to measure”)⁵, from which Latin *mensura* (Engl. *measure*) is also derived. Originally a deverbial noun meaning “measuring” or “measurement,”⁶ *mētis* was accordingly connected with another key philosophical concept, *metron*. Although it does not stem from the same Indo-European root, from a very early period, *mētis* is also associated with the verb *mēdomai* (“to deliberate,” “to judge,” “to measure,” “to devise”) and the noun *mēdea* (“male genitalia,” “testicles”).⁷ The link

⁴ *Aristotle's metaphysics*, ed. William Ross, 2 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 982a.14-17.

⁵ Robert Beeks, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden – Boston, 2010), s.v. *μῆτις*; Max Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary of Russian Language*, 4 Vols (Moscow: Progress, 1987) [in Russian], s.v. *мера*.

⁶ Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. *мера*.

⁷ Beeks, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. *μῆδεα* and *μῆδομαι*; cf. also Vasmer, *Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. *мудо*.

between physical and noetic generation, and the concentration of both forces in the sexual organs, is thus semantically grounded.

A more precise understanding of *mētis* requires situating this capacity within broader ancient conceptions of the body and human mental faculties. As Bruno Snell has shown, in Homer the living human body is not readily perceived as a unified whole: the term *dēmas*, which denotes such unity, never occurs in the nominative case,⁸ while *sōma*, standard in Classical Greek, still refers exclusively to the dead body. The living human body consists of “limbs” (*guia*, *melea/melē*) governed by various psychic–mental “organs,”⁹ or “preconscious hypostases.”¹⁰ Since Homeric thought does not yet draw a clear boundary between physical organs and psychic activity,¹¹ the terminology blurs this distinction. The former include *noos*, *thymos*, *mētis*, *psychē*, and more rarely *priapēs/priapides*, while the latter comprise the heart (*kēr*, *kardia*, *kradiē*), the liver (*ētor*), and above all *phrēn/phrēnes*—a collective term encompassing the pericardial cavity, diaphragm, and lungs.¹² Located in the latter and often identified with them, *noos* broadly governs perception, comprehension, imagination, planning, intentions, and calm emotions, whereas *thymos* is the source of excessive emotions that impel action

⁸ Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind. The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. Thomas Rosenmeyer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 5 and 8.

⁹ Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston – New York: Mariner Books, 1976), p. 259ff. (“the assumed causes of action when other causes are no longer apparent”).

¹¹ James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: the Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press), 1975, p. 173.

¹² Shirley Sullivan, *Psychological Activity in Homer. A Study of Phrēn* (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1988), pp. 2 and 21–29; Shirley Sullivan, “The Mind and Heart of Zeus in Homer and the Homeric Hymns,” pp. 99ff and 105, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 37 (1994), 101–126. Cf also Shirley Sullivan, *Sophocles’ Use of Psychological Terminology: Old and New* (Richmont, Ontario: Carleton University Press, 1999), pp. 11, 15; Boban Dedović, “A quantitative psycholinguistic comparison of the Iliad and Odyssey,” *PsyArXiv Preprints*, January 2021, p. 7 and n. 8; Richard Onians, *The origins of European thought. About the body, the mind, the soul, the world time, and fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1951, pp. 23–33, who accepts the dubious hypothesis that *phrēnes* are the lungs, but analyses in depth the concept that they are dry and dark-blue, or black, when one is sober and awake.

and is usually associated with the heart. The translation of these terms is virtually impossible outside their context, since modern Indo-European languages draw different distinctions among cognitive functions. Finally, *psychē* (ψυχή) in early epic does not yet mean “soul” (a sense that emerges only with the lyric poets and Heraclitus¹³) but rather “life,” occurring primarily in descriptions of its departure at death or in reference to the soul of the deceased.¹⁴

Within this framework, Homer and Hesiod locate *mētis* in the *phrēnes*, together with emotions, perception, and planning,¹⁵ and this close terminological association gave rise to a wide semantic field associated with practical intelligence, including, most notably, the term *phronēsis* (“care,” “practical wisdom”) and the verb *phrazō* (“to show,” “indicate,” “observe,” “think”) with its derivatives, characteristically conflating thinking with the articulation of thought.¹⁶

One of the most frequently analyzed episodes in the Homeric epic for illustrating pragmatic thinking and *mētis* is the chariot race held in honor of Patroclus in *Iliad* 23,¹⁷ where the young Antilochus must compete with inferior horses. Following his father Nestor’s advice,¹⁸ he compensates for his lack of strength with *mētis*: exploiting a narrow stretch of the course, he forces Menelaus to yield and finishes (formally) second. After the race, the Spartan king sharply rebukes Antilochus for having won dishonestly, and Nestor’s son humbly apologizes for his youthful recklessness, offering as compensation his prize.¹⁹ In Homeric poetry, chariot racing (and competition in general) appears as an expres-

¹³ On *psychē* as a “psychological agent” in lyrical poetry, associated with positive emotions, see Sullivan, *Disturbances of the Mind*, p. 32ff.

¹⁴ Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, p. 8ff.; Sullivan, *Sophocles’ Use of Psychological Terminology*, p. 3.

¹⁵ Shirley Sullivan, “Phrenes in Hesiod,” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 67/1 (1989), 5–17.

¹⁶ On their connection with *phrēn/phrēnes*, see Sullivan, *Psychological Activity*, pp. 39 and 91.

¹⁷ *Homeri Ilias*, ed. Thomas Allen, 3 Vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1931), XXIII.258–650. Cf. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 11–27.

¹⁸ *Homeri Ilias* XXIII.313–318. Cf. Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, p. 47; Hawee, *Bodily Arts*, pp. 46ff.

¹⁹ *Homeri Ilias* XXIII.566–613.

sion of a natural order in which strength is expected to prevail. Antilochus disrupts this expectation and violates the code of warrior conduct by “stealing” victory through skill and cunning.

In his study of agonistic culture in early Greek epic and lyric, Gregory Nagy likewise offers a detailed analysis of the conflict between Achilles and Odysseus, focusing on Achilles’ brief speech, which treats with irony the prospect that his opponent’s cunning and technical expertise could repel Hector’s overwhelming force from the Achaeans’ ships.²⁰ In Nagy’s opinion, the *Iliad* itself is a narrative structured around the opposition between brute force (*biē*) and cunning, where Achilles’ wrath deprives the Achaeans of their greatest source of strength, while his return shatters both the force and the practical intellect of Hector,²¹ the city’s steadfast defender. The fall of Troy thus emerges as a “two-factor” event, in which Odysseus’ cunning and ultimate success are catalyzed and enabled by Achilles’ might.

In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the conflicts among the three generations of gods reflect an immanent tripartite structure of power comprising force (*biē*), perceptual–volitional faculties (*noos*), and practical intellect (*mētis*).²² Whereas in Homer *mētis* functions only as a predicate, in Hesiod it becomes a subject through its personification as the goddess Metis, who embodies the capacity for accurate and effective judgment in concrete problematic situations, technical ingenuity, persuasion, and manipulation, being once again opposed to the “natural” means of acquiring power through brute force.²³ In this sense, Metis drives the divine etiology of the world, understood in the original meaning of *kosmos* (“order,” “ornament”), within Hesiod’s mythological framework of the transition from lawlessness to tyranny and, ultimately, from tyranny to

²⁰ *Homeri Ilias* VIII.346–352. Cf. Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, pp. 45–49.

²¹ Gregory Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 145–147. Nagy argues that Hector appears not only as a personification of physical force and might but also as a personification of *mētis*. In order to be defeated by the brutal force of Achilles, his mind must be obscured by the goddess Athena (*Homeri Ilias* XXII.222–247 and 296–299).

²² Alex Priou, “Hesiod: Man, Law and Cosmos,” *Polis* 31/2 (2014), 233–260.

²³ Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 62–68. Cf. Jay Dolmage, “Metis, Mētis, Mestiza, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions,” p. 6, *Rhetoric Review* 28/1 (2009), 1–28, who defines Homer’s *mētis* as “flair, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, cleverness, opportunism, and experience”.

legitimate rule.²⁴ She enables Gaia to free herself from Uranus' insatiable sexual desire by devising, through deceptive craft, the great serrated sickle and persuading her *cunning* (*ankylomētis*)²⁵ son to sever his father's genitals (*mēdea*), thereby depriving him not only of the power to generate physical life but also of any further role in shaping the cosmic order. Again, her cunning daughter Rhea devises a way to save the infant Zeus from Cronus, and the Cyclopes invent the thunderbolt, through which the new king of the gods defeats and binds the Titans. However important in achieving the victory, *mētis* must be supplanted by Zeus' higher, strategically oriented *noos* when a new order of the cosmos is to be shaped, and this order is perfect, because it rests not only on power but also on laws to which even the Olympians must submit.²⁶ The cosmic struggle for divine supremacy, however, does not end here. It closes again with cunning: upon learning the prophecy that his wife will bear a son stronger than himself, Zeus deceives her with crafty, flattering words and swallows her.²⁷ In doing so, the most powerful of the gods incorporates within himself both Kratos and Biē (Power and Force) and all forms of intelligence²⁸—from the ability to adapt one's actions wisely to specific circumstances and to persuade, deceive, and manipulate, to the strategic anticipation of distant events and the measures they require. The omnipotent Zeus Metiēta/Metietēs²⁹ thus becomes not merely a god who possesses *mētis* but *mētis* incarnate. From this point onward, the Father of the Gods can no longer be deceived, nor can any stratagem be devised that escapes his knowledge.

Based on these paradigmatic episodes, as well as many others in Homer and Hesiod, it is possible to reconstruct *mētis* in its various senses, which combine cognitive–mental and technical dimensions. Inventiveness and a kind of “professional expertise” are among its core

²⁴ On this concept, cf. also Cicero, “De inventione rhetorica,” in Cicero, *De inventione. De optimo genere oratorum. Topica*, ed. and trans. Harry Hubbel [Loeb Classical Library 386] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press and London: Heinemann, 1949), §1.1.2.

²⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, ed. Martin West (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vv. 18, 168, 473, 495.

²⁶ Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 73ff.

²⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 37ff. The same expression also appears in Homer (*Homeri Ilias* I.70).

²⁸ Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 90ff.

²⁹ Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, p. 68.

features, as is evident from Nestor's advice to his son Antilochus, from the inventions of Gaia and the Cyclopes, and, we must add, from the Trojan Horse, by means of which the resourceful (*polymētis*) Odysseus captures Troy. In later periods, *mētis* becomes closely associated with rhetorical skill, as opposed to contemplative philosophy and theoretical logic, and with sophistry. A well-known example is the legend of Protagoras, who, in his youth, attracted the attention of the philosopher Democritus with his load-bearing device (*týlē*)³⁰ – a clever invention that, according to Aristotle and Diogenes Laertius, was a sign of his practical intellect and future career.

A second defining feature of *mētis* is its situational character, specifically its temporality. In times of uncertainty and conflict, ever-shifting circumstances favor those with practical intelligence. *Mētis* is the ability to seize the right moment after prolonged observation and anticipation, thereby overcoming a stronger opponent by exploiting even the smallest opening. In early Greek literature, however, a “situation” is not confined to a single, self-contained episode unfolding within a homogeneous chronotope, as in later tragic dramaturgy; rather, the situationality of *mētis* presupposes an entire chain of events bound together by shared causal relations and agents.³¹

It is precisely through careful observation of reality—understood as a constellation of circumstances—that the later term *phronēsis* (practical wisdom, care, engagement) emerges. However, the temporality of *mētis* differs fundamentally from linear, “vulgar” time in Heidegger's sense. It does not refer to measurable, objective *chronos*, but instead involves constructing and recognizing a “special” temporal framework. Centuries later, sophists and rhetoricians will call this “human” time *kairos* or *tempus speciale*. This does not designate the experienced in-

³⁰ *Aristotelis qui ferebantur librorum fragmenta*, ed. Valentine Rose (Leipzig: Teubner, 1967), I.7.63.2.

³¹ Cf., e.g., *Hymni Homerici*. “In Cererem,” v. 414-416, in *The Homeric hymns*, ed. Thomas Allen, William Halliday, and Eustace Sikes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. 2–20, where Zeus's concentrated *mētis* encompasses his daughter's kidnapping by Hades and the following events.

stant, Heidegger's *Augenblick*,³² but the opportunity for action itself. *Mētis* thus arises from temporal thinking: knowledge of the past and anticipation of the future within, and against, an ever-changing present.

The situational and temporal character of *mētis* presupposes the ability to navigate an unstable and fluid reality. For this reason, pragmatic intelligence is often described through terms denoting variability and adaptability. The archetypal narrative of the opposition between human order, governed by *mētis*, and the chaos of an unstable present is the *Odyssey*. Stormy or calm, we can discern in the image of the sea in this archetypal story both a path toward return and an obstacle separating the hero from Ithaca, whose traversal demands the full range of Odysseus' practical wisdom. Yet the association between *mētis* and the sea extends far deeper into mythological strata than the metaphor of the hero's journey alone. Detienne and Vernant have shown the connection between two divine embodiments of practical intellect, Athena and Hephaestus, and the sea, as well as with beings that mediate between water and land. These gods also preside over cunning and inventiveness.³³

A third defining feature of the dynamic and mutable character of *mētis* is its correlation with the static nature of brute force (*bia*, *biē*).³⁴ Practical in-

³² The identification of *kairos* with Heidegger's *Augenblick* proposed by Katharina von Falkenheyn (*Augenblick und Kairos: Zeitlichkeit im Frühwerk Martin Heideggers*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2003) has been convincingly challenged by Hakhamanesh Zangeneh ("Augenblick is not kairos," *Heidegger Circle Proceedings* 45 [2011]: 25–38).

³³ *Pausaniae Graeciae description*, ed. Friedrich Spiro, 3 Vols (Leipzig: Teubner, 1967), 1.5.3.12–1.5.4.1. Cf. Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 215–221 and 259–277.

³⁴ See Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 60ff.; Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, pp. 42–59; Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011), p. 6; Roger Dunkle, "Nestor, Odysseus, and the *Metis-Bie* Antithesis: The Funeral Games, *Iliad* 23," *Classical World* 81 (1998), 1–17; Dolmage, "Metis, Mētis, Mestiza, Medusa," p. 9. Ingrid Holmberg proposes an intriguing but debated reading of early evidence for *mētis*, arguing that *biē* encompasses both brute force and rational thought as a masculine prerogative. In contrast, *mētis* is primarily feminine (Ingrid Holmberg, "The Sign of MHTIS," *Arethusa* 30 [1997], 1–33). She interprets Hesiod's narrative as the appropriation of this feminine attribute by male deities, culminating in Zeus' swallowing of Metis. While influential, this approach may risk anachronism, particularly since Homeric figures such as Odysseus, Nestor, and Hector exhibit *mētis* without any marked association with femininity.

tellec disrupts the “natural” course of events and the inexorable rule of Necessity (*Anankē*), which under otherwise equal conditions favors the stronger. In this regard, *mētis* is an anomaly, but also the antithesis of mindless and inhuman brutality, whose elimination is a prerequisite for both the establishment of a just society and the protection of this society against the excesses of tyranny. Hesiod expresses this idea metaphorically in the myth of Zeus, who defeats the mighty Titans with the aid of the Cyclopes’ ingenious inventions and ultimately gains not only dominion over the world but also orders it through just laws. Thus, already at the dawn of Greek literature and culture, the notion emerges that through *mētis* the weaker can prevail over the stronger, humanity can overcome otherwise inevitable death, and order can triumph over chaos.³⁵

Mētis is not merely a means of overcoming others but also a regulatory mechanism of emotional excess. Its absence triggers the action of the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon irrationally and unjustly demands compensation from Achilles for returning Chryseis by taking Briseis; similarly, irrational and reckless aggression nearly destroys Diomedes when he twice attacks Apollo as the god defends Troy’s walls, until he succeeds in restraining himself and abandons the assault. These examples define practical intellect as technical inventiveness and situational pragmatism that could both defeat brute force and regulate it. Unlike the sensory-contemplative *nous*, this pragmatism always aims to achieve a specific material outcome, which may be tactical, focusing on a single situation akin to a dramatic episode, or strategic, confining the entire narrative sequence. Consequently, its archetypal representative, Odysseus, is frequently described with the mercantile epithet *kerdaleos*, derived from *kerdos* (“profit”), a term that signifies not only resourcefulness but also an inherent orientation toward material gain.³⁶

A fourth characteristic of practical intellect is its inherent subjectiveness, which later positioned rhetoric in opposition to philosophy’s pursuit of objective knowledge and immutable reality. Protean *mētis*

³⁵ Pietro Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos. Intertextual readings in the Odyssey and the Iliad* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 15.

³⁶ Cf., e.g., *Homeri Odyssea*, ed. Peter von der Mühl (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1962), XIII.291-299 (*kerdaleos* and *kerdos*). See also *Homeri Ilias*, XXIII.322, where Nestor insists that, knowing the right tricks, one can win the chariot race even with inferior horses; Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*, pp. 12, 27, 34, 228, do not mention this semantic layer.

manifests both effectiveness and manipulateness in the ever-changing Trickster archetype,³⁷ represented by deities such as Hephaestus, Hermes, and Pan; heroes such as Prometheus and Odysseus, and many characters from modern literature and cinema. The Trickster displays both positive and negative attributes, including a devious sense of humor. Christianity employs these characteristics in descriptions of the Devil and his demons, in which evil is frequently depicted as cunning and deceptively clever, using epithets also associated with Odysseus (*polytropos*, *panourgos*).³⁸

The subjectivity of *mētis* and its examples brings an expected uncertainty, made clear in Homer's story of Odysseus' clever win over the strong Polyphemus. The person with practical intelligence wins because he can change faces and identities like an actor wearing masks as the moment needs, showing his authentic self only at the right time—or hiding it forever—while keeping his own voice as a sign of identity.³⁹ In front of Polyphemus, Odysseus is “Nobody” (*mētis*), a name that not only takes away a stable identity but, through a play on words, makes him the very example of the tool he uses to win—his *mētis* (μητις).⁴⁰ At crucial moments, this shifting of faces becomes Odysseus' primary tool, both pragmatic and metaphorical, for overcoming danger and securing success. For example, he feigns madness to avoid the expedition to Troy,⁴¹ slips into the besieged city disguised as a wretched servant,⁴² and waits for the opportune moment to

³⁷ On the Trickster, see Carl Jung, “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 9.1: *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. Richard Hull [Bollingen Series XX] (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), pp. 255–275. See also Nagy, *The Best of Achaeans*, p. 51.

³⁸ As one of Homer's scholiasts observes, the adjective *polytropos* in epic is often used in a predominantly pejorative sense (*Porphyrii quaestionum Homericarum ad Odysseam pertinentium reliquiae*, ed. Hermann Schrader (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890), I.1.1–15). For the Christian uses of these terms, see Gerasim Petrinski, *The Image of the Demon in Byzantium* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2024), pp. 213ff. Probably under the influence of Christianity, *panourgos* today carries strong negative connotations, especially when applied to women.

³⁹ Pucci, *Odysseus Polytropos*, pp. 76–78.

⁴⁰ Robert Eickhoff, *Homer. The Odyssey. A Modern Translation* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2001), p. 404, n. 4. Cf. also Dolmage, “Metis, Mētis, Mestiza, Medusa,” p. 6.

⁴¹ *Apollodori bibliotheca. Pediasimi libellus de duodecim Herculis laboribus*, ed. Richard Wagner [*Mythographi Graeci* 1. Leipzig: Teubner, 1894], 3.7a.

⁴² *Homeri Odyssea*, IV.242–258.

defeat the suitors—superior in number and strength—while disguised as a poor beggar.⁴³ These transformations are not merely personal stratagems; the driving force is often his patron, the goddess Athena. Notably, her father, Zeus, who swallowed her mother, Metis, and became her successor and embodiment, is perhaps the most frequent shape-shifter among the gods in mythological tradition.⁴⁴

***Noos* and the birth of contemplative intellect**

Although much scholarship has focused on *mētis*, Homer and Hesiod employ a far richer vocabulary to denote different forms of intelligence. Building on this broader range of concepts will allow us to refine existing interpretations and to shed light on the pragmatic and theoretical modes of intellect that later underpin rhetoric and argumentation. Among these terms, probably the most important is the broad and complex semantic field of *noos* (Classical Greek *nous*). Unlike many other concepts, this field does not fragment over time through the gradual transfer of discrete meanings to new terms; instead, the term maintains semantic cohesion and attains exceptional complexity in Christian contexts.

From an etymological perspective, *noos* presents considerable difficulties. Earlier proposals link the term either to Gothic *snutrs* (“wise”) or to the root **neu-* reflected in the Greek verb *neuō* (“to nod, assent”).⁴⁵ In 1978, Douglas Frame, combining linguistic, semantic, cultural, and literary analysis, proposed an etymology from the root **nes-*, attested in *neomai* (“to return”) and, most notably, in the Odyssean concept of *nostos* (“return”).⁴⁶ He further suggested that the same root underlies the name Nestor, whose wisdom is frequently described as both *mētis* and *nous*.⁴⁷ As Robert Beekes has observed, this hypothesis is linguistically possible but semantically unpersuasive.⁴⁸ Given the substantial semantic difficulties faced by most proposed etymologies, it seems preferable to

⁴³ *Homeri Odyssea*, 429–538. See also Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition*, pp. 41–67.

⁴⁴ Each of the stories included by these authors in their collections describes mortal women’s seduction (Europa, Danae, Leda, Alcmene).

⁴⁵ Beekes, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. νόος, with bibliography.

⁴⁶ Douglas Frame, *The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic* (New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1978), pp. 1–5.

⁴⁷ Frame, *The Myth of Return*, p. 85.

⁴⁸ Beekes, *Etymological dictionary*, s.v. νόος. Cf. also Frederick Combellack’s critical review in *Classical Philology* 76/3 (July 1981), 225–228.

regard the Indo-European origin of *noos/nous* as uncertain and to avoid the temptation to pursue speculative interpretations of hidden meanings or allegorical structures in the Homeric text, as Frame does.

A more productive approach is to examine the meanings of *noos* and the verb *noeō* (νοέω) explicitly attested in ancient texts. As Snell has emphasized, the earliest of these is tied to the simultaneous acts of seeing and understanding what is seen—a kind of “spiritual vision” (*ein ‘geistiges’ Sehen*).⁴⁹ In several passages of the epic, Homer uses the term in expressions meaning “to grasp with the eyes.”⁵⁰ And centuries later, Aristotle confirms this early semantic layer when he notes that, for the “ancients” (whom he means by Homer and the early natural philosophers), thinking was a sensory, bodily form of perception, akin to seeing and hearing.⁵¹ *Noos* thus constitutes the center of the human capacity both of perception and imagination: to imagine reality, to form the desire to change it, and to plan such change rationally.⁵² In this way, it already contains the roots of what later becomes abstract thinking—the ability to apprehend a broader configuration of reality than that accessible to the situational and manipulative scope of *mētis*.

Since the *noos* functions both as the faculty through which humans perceive images and as the source from which images are produced, it denotes early on conscious understanding of reality⁵³, the formulation of a goal, and the capacity to decide upon its realization.⁵⁴ Frequently, the term retains a situational character and is set in opposition to *mētis*, creating an apparent volatility of Homeric vocabulary in this regard. At times, *noos* is described as impulsive, suggesting a tactical, short-term

⁴⁹ Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 182 and 198; Joachim Böhme, *Die Seele und das Ich im Homerischen Epos: mit einem Anhang vergleich mit dem Glauben der Primitiven* (Berlin: Teubner, 1929), p. 53; Bruno Snell, “Joachim Böhme: Die Seele und das Ich im homerischen Epos. Mit einem Anhang: Vergleich mit dem Glauben der Primitiven,” p. 77 and p. 83, n. 3, *Gnomon* 7 (1931), 74–86; Frame, *The Myth of Return*, p. 30.

⁵⁰ *Homeri Ilias* XV.422 and XXIV.294.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *De anima*, 427a.21–28.

⁵² Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 9, 13, and passim; Stephen Sullivan, “The Mind and Heart of Zeus in Homer and the Homeric Hymns, p. 108, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 37 (1994), 101–126.

⁵³ See, e.g., *Homeri Ilias* XV.461; *Homeri Ilias* XI.813; *Homeri Odyssea* XIII.255. Cf. Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., *Homeri Odyssea* X.329; *Homeri Odyssea* XXII.77 (*polykerdēs noos*).

orientation, while broader, long-range strategic wisdom is (paradoxically) attributed to *mētis*.⁵⁵ Yet this opposition is conceptually coherent. The two terms do not differ in the proximity of their goals, nor along a simple axis of abstraction versus concreteness. Rather, *noos* designates both the planning based on all the available information⁵⁶ and the intention to carry it out, whereas *mētis* is the capacity to devise the concrete means for realizing that decision and to judge its appropriateness within a given situation. Put simply, *noos* answers the question of what is to be done, while *mētis* determines how—and whether—it should be done in light of circumstances and participants in the rhetorical situation.⁵⁷

Noos refers to subjective perception and intention, which may shift through deliberate choice and sustained inner conviction.⁵⁸ That is not the case with *mētis*. Antilochus' decision to yield the second prize to the stronger and more authoritative Menelaus is a practical and effective means of avoiding conflict, not a real change of opinion. Therefore, unlike the goal-oriented *mētis*, *noos* contains no element of cunning or manipulation and remains relatively stable throughout the ancient literary and philosophical tradition, even as each era nuances its meaning differently and supplements it with additional semantic strata. In contrast, the ever-shifting practical intellect is denoted by a wide array of terms that reflect its multiform character.

In Hesiod, Zeus's supreme intellect (*megas noos*), his capacity for comprehension and abstraction, is also explicitly distinguished from his situational *mētis*, in sharp contrast with his father Cronus. With the aid of the Muses, it gives the highest of the Olympians the capacity to circumspect the past, to foresee the future, and ultimately to govern the world by transcending the contingencies and demands of the present.⁵⁹ Zeus' perfect *noos* operates according to its own logic and governs mortal fate through a design that remains largely inaccessible to human un-

⁵⁵ Cf., e.g., *Homeri Ilias* XXXIII.587 and XV.227.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 1002.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., *Homeri Ilias* VII.448.

⁵⁸ Homer maintains that Zeus' *noos* is unalterable by either gods (*Od.* V.103ff.) or humans (*Il.* VIII.139–42), using verbs that imply confrontation or coercive interference (*parerchomai*, *haliōō*, *eryō*). By contrast, at *Il.* XVII.546 the shift in Zeus' intention—away from supporting the Trojans and toward the preservation of Patroclus' body—is expressed with *trepō* (“to turn”); cf. Sullivan, “The Mind and Heart,” 106.

⁵⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 36–38.

derstanding. *Noos* is described as a gift to mortals, stolen by Prometheus; however, among humans, it is mutable, unstable, and varies from person to person as widely as *the day introduced by the father of gods and men*.⁶⁰ In them, it is restrained and subdued (*damnatai*) by Eros, the primordial, protean, and at times dangerous force of connection in the world, which is associated both mythologically and practically with cunning, deception, and manipulative persuasion.⁶¹ As a result, mastery over desire is regarded as the highest form of piety, protecting humans from the temptation to equate themselves with the gods—a motif present in Plato's discussions of love in the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, as well as in Gorgias' sophistic *Encomium of Helen*. Socrates' claim that the only matters he truly understands are those of love⁶² indicates not only the limitations of philosophy as a rational pursuit of truth but also his reverence for the gods.

The archaic term *noos* broadly denotes the processes of acquiring knowledge, imagination, analytic and synthetic reasoning, and theoretical planning. With the development of philosophical reflection on the human intellect in the Classical period, new concepts emerged from the same root. The most important of them are *dianoia*, usually translated as "reason" (and less often "imagination"), and *noēsis*, rendered as "intellect." Plato famously distinguishes these faculties in the context of the "divided line" in the *Republic* and elsewhere. In his system, *nous* is the mode of apprehending intelligible realities, as opposed to the ever-changing field of the visible. Plato terms *dianoia* the lower level of human abstract thinking, by which *nous* pursues this goal: an analytic process in which, for example, a mathematician proceeds from axiomatic assumptions whose ultimate grounds remain unknown, advancing through proof toward a terminal point (*teleutē*) in the chain of reasoning. The highest form of knowledge, however, is achieved through *noēsis*, the synthetic process by which dialectic leads from given premises to

⁶⁰ *Homeri Odyssea* XVIII.136ff; cf. also Aristotle, *De anima*, 427a.27. For comments on this passage, see Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, pp. 202 (cf also 145ff.) and Kurt von Fritz, "ΝΟΟΣ and ΝΟΕΙΝ in the Homeric Poems," p. 81, *Classical Philology* 38/2 (April 1943), 79–93.

⁶¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, v. 120–122.

⁶² Plato, "Symposium," in *Platonis opera*, ed. John Burnet, Vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 172a–223d, 177d.8.

their first principle (*archē*).⁶³ In Late Antiquity, the same term acquires a more specific rhetorical sense, denoting the initial stage of discourse formation—the articulation of the point at issue (*stasis*), that is, the thesis itself. In this way, the Greek language and Greek philosophy preserve the term’s original sense of intellectual conception or design.

Conclusion

The early Greek epos suggests that early Greek thought recognized multiple types of cognition whose domains, functions, and values became differentiated over time. Though these authors have employed many other notions, two terms seem to denote capacities for feeling, grasping, and understanding the world, as well as for planning and adjusting one’s actions to ever-changing circumstances: *mētis* and *noos*. Since they express a very ancient semantic stratum, several centuries before the Classical Period, later philosophical texts may be of little help in revealing their true meaning. A modern scholar, well-versed in Platonic distinctions between Reason, Spirit, and Appetite, or in the various and well-elaborated faculties of the soul in Aristotle, would find Homeric and Hesiodic terminology recalcitrant to his conceptual apparatus.

In their monumental work on *mētis*, the French scholars Detienne and Vernant translated this complex term descriptively, namely as “les ruses de l’intelligence,” and in English it is rendered as “cunning intelligence.” Both expressions, though they grasp some aspects of the authentic Greek meanings, are strongly pejorative and thus seem misleading. *Mētis* sometimes appears as cunning and crafty manipulation, but also as technical skill, the capacity to find new opportunities, adaptiveness, and even conformity. It is sharply opposed to brute force, as it enables the weaker opponent to defeat the stronger. For that reason, a better translation seems to be “practical intellect” or “practical intelligence” - a rather neutral term that represents both the positive traits in the original notion and its ethical ambivalence.

The second key term used by the early epic poets, *noos*, unlike *mētis*, was not abandoned but appears frequently in later philosophical and literary traditions, enriched with many new semantic strata and with new derivatives. Even in its earliest epic representations, it conveys

⁶³ *Platonis Rempublicam*, ed. Sjoerd Slings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 510b.4–510d.3, 511a, 511c.3–511e5.

more abstract patterns of contemplative thought, denoting both a mental organ and a capacity to understand complex events, formulate goals, and, ultimately, plan solutions to problems. Practical intellect is the “inner eye,” designed to see the whole picture amid seemingly chaotic reality. Thus, according to Hesiod, Zeus defeated his father through *mētis*, but created the new cosmic order, based on laws, through his *megas noos*. The complex but coherent set of meanings paved the way for the term’s great future in later Greek philosophy. As Greek thought becomes more abstract, *noos* is elevated to the status of contemplative intellect, ultimately acquiring metaphysical and theological significance.

The fate of the two fundamental concepts in early Greek culture was different - was different, a divergence that reflects a broader transformation of values within Greek intellectual culture, in which adaptability and technical ingenuity, once essential for survival in the turbulent and violent Homeric period, are increasingly subordinated to ideals of stability, universality, and theoretical understanding. Though abandoned and largely forgotten in Classical Greece, the continued presence of *mētis* in rhetorical theory, though under the disguise of other terms, shows that this subordination was never absolute. The great mother of Athene, so savagely devoured by her husband, may have become a dimming image in the collective mythological memory of Greece, but the practical intelligence, usually under the name *phronēsis*, remained incorporated in the very fabric of ancient and medieval rhetoric and the very concept of education.