Courage, Intelligence, And Physical Strength In The Iliad Of Homer

Courage, intelligence, and physical strength are all excellent qualities found in humans, and they are valued above all else to the ancient Greeks in The Iliad of Homer. These qualities can be seen in many of the characters in this epic poem, and the people fortunate enough to have these qualities are regarded more highly than those who lack them. A person's excellence or their aretê is determined by their courage, intelligence, or physical strength that they exhibit to those around them.

While intelligence and physical strength are fiercely respected by the Greeks in The Iliad of Homer, courage is seen as the best quality a person can have. In fact, it is this lack of courage that turns Paris' own brother Hektor against him in the fight with the Achaians. Hektor notices Paris' fear towards Menelaos and states "Surely now the flowing-haired Achaians laugh at us, thinking you are our bravest champion, only because your looks are handsome, but there is no strength in your heart, no courage" (Homer 3.43-45). Hektor, therefore, lost any respect he had for Paris all because he showed weakness towards an enemy that Paris himself provoked. Even though Paris is seen as "godlike" due to his beauty, it is not enough to sustain his aretê to his family let alone his comrades. Cowardice could then be seen as the worst quality to have amongst the ancient Greeks, and once displayed, it is hard to gain back the respect lost.

Similarly to courage, intelligence is a virtue admired amongst the Achaians and is used as a determinant for a person's aretê. Intelligence is seen as the ability to reason and to cleverly be able persuade others with merely words. It is a powerful tool if wielded correctly and a prime example of this power is displayed by Odysseus. Odysseus was visited by Athena and told to go to the kings of the Achaians in order to rally them to fight against the Trojans. "So he went through the army marshaling it, until once more they swept back into the assembly place from the ships and shelters clamorously…" (Homer 2.207-209). Since men of great influence all listened to Odysseus, it shows an enormous amount of respect for his voice of reason and his wisdom. If Athena, a goddess of Olympos, knew that Odysseus could succeed in encouraging the Achaians where Agamemnon failed then this proves that Odysseus' intelligence is the major determinant for his aretê. Therefore intelligence is an important quality as well when determining someone's excellence.

In addition to courage and intelligence, physical strength is another characteristic revered by the Achaians and is obviously portrayed by Achilleus. Achilleus is a demigod and as such his strength on the battlefield greatly surprasses that of the average man. A man with such physical strength as Achilleus would make it nearly impossible to not highly esteem him. He is able to commit amazing feats which in return gains him respect among the Achaians. Due to this Achilleus has immense influence, enough to make Agamemnon worry that he may try to overthrow his authority "Yet here is a man who wishes to be above all others, who wishes to hold power over all, and to be lord of all, and give them their orders, yet I think one will not obey him" (Homer 1.287-289). Without his physical strength Achilleus would not have acquired so much respect from his fellow Achaians which in turn would not have made him a threat to Agamemnon. Physical strength played a key component in determining Achilleus' aretê and helped him gain power over his soldiers.

In The Iliad of Homer there is a correlation between a person’s aretê and the amount of power they wield. The higher a person’s excellence, the more respect they garner and with that more power. Men like Agamemnon, Odysseus, Achilleus and Paris are all men of influence and they all have or had in Paris’ case great worth in the eyes of their peers. Their qualities whether it be courage, intelligence, or physical strength help to determine their excellence and maintain their status as great men. Without such characteristics it would have been very hard for them to have earned their positions. They might have been born into titles like a king but it is very difficult to maintain such a position without the respect of your subjects. These men prove that it takes certain qualities as well as effort to gain excellence.