Achilles and Agamemnon’s legendary dispute in Book One of *The Iliad* is the direct cause of one of the biggest problems for the Achaeans throughout the work, namely, that of Achilles withdrawing from battle.

The question of what Aristotle would have to say about this dispute will be the subject of this essay. First, we will define what Aristotle means by justice by looking at Book Five of *Nicomachean Ethics* and discuss why Aristotelian justice is deeply relevant to the dispute in Book One of *The Iliad*. We will see how the conflict between Lord of Men Agamemnon and brilliant Achilles has its source in different ideas on what source distributive justice should be drawn from. Then we will see how their conflict escalates into how rectificatory justice must be executed. Finally, we will conclude by seeing how Achilles would be, according to Aristotle, the more just of the two, but ultimately they are both unjust.

Aristotle writes that justice “is the complete exercise of complete virtue” (1129b31) and defines justice as “virtue in relation to another” (1129b28). Because a human being must necessarily come into contact with other people it is easy to discern that justice is crucial among the virtues and therefore very important in Aristotle’s account.
Aristotle makes a distinction between universal justice on one hand and then special or particular justice on the other (1130a34-35). Universal justice is concerned with how lawful and
fair a person is generally (1130b21). Special justice, and hence special injustice, deals with honour or wealth (1130b3), and it is therefore the one of the two kinds of justice that we must examine given that the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon is precisely about honour and wealth.

The fact that the dispute in The Iliad qualifies as an issue of special justice is clear if we look at how the conflict begins between the two Greeks. Agamemnon is told that to appease Apollo he must give a girl, Chryseis, back to her father (1.113-18). Agamemnon is upset by this but complies, but he must have someone else's prize lest "I alone of the Argives go without my honour. That would be a disgrace" (1.139).

Aristotle goes on to say that special justice is divided into two species: distributive justice and rectificatory justice. The first is defined as “the distribution of honours or wealth (...) that can be divided among members of a community” (1130b30-34). The second is defined as the "intermediate between loss and profit" (1132a19) If one has been stolen from or injured the judge tries to "restore the profit and loss to a position of equality, by subtraction from the offender’s profit" (1132a11-12).

The dispute between the two Greeks starts off as distributive justice and then escalates into rectificatory justice. As previously said, Agamemnon feels it is just to take someone else’s prize after returning the girl on the basis that he is a king, and therefore to go without honour would be unjust. Aristotle himself says that “If the people involved are not equal, they will not justly receive equal shares” (1131a23-24). The prize given to him must be “equal to what I’ve lost” (1.159) - hence, he ends up taking Achilles’s prize, Briseis.
However, Achilles immediately piques up and accuses the king of being greedy. After all, all of the wealth and honour has already been portioned out. The real injustice, according to Achilles, would be if it were all called back and for someone to possess less than what they presently have for Agamemnon’s sake. He even says that once Agamemnon has returned the girl to her father the Achaeans will pay him back many times over if they win the war (1.143-50). Achilles at least recognizes that Agamemnon is suffering by giving up the girl and says he will get his dues eventually.

Agamemnon responds that Achilles is trying to leave him “empty handed” (1.158) and that if he will not get anything he will take it by force (1.160-63). Achilles now accuses Agamemnon of being unworthy of his position as a king because of his vices “You lack the courage, you can see death coming. Safer by far, you find, to foray all through camp, commandeering the prize of any man who speaks against you. The king who devours his people!(1.175-79). He also says that for Agamemnon to take his prize would be unjust because “I fought so long and hard, the sons of Achaea handed her to me” (1.190-91). He then complains that “My honours never equal yours” and that he does the majority of the fighting, but when the plunder is divided the lion’s share unjustly goes to Agamemnon (1.193-99).

The source of the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon has to do with worth. Aristotle says that “All agree that the just in distribution must accord with some sort of worth, but what they call the worth is not the same” (1130b26-27). The problem is that Agamemnon and Achilles have different ideas on worth. Lord of Men Agamemnon believes he possess more worth, and therefore deserves the most honour and
wealth, because he is the king as a result of being wealthy. However, brilliant Achilles believes he possess more worth, and that he should
get the honour and wealth, because he is the most talented fighter. Aristotle would say that Agamemnon is more of an oligarch, and Achilles more of an aristocrat (1131a28-29).

The dispute becomes more heated when Achilles announces that he will “journey home in the beaked ships of war. I have no mind to linger here disgraced, brimming your cup and piling up your plunder”. Achilles feels that the source (Oligarchic) from which the Achaeans’ way of distributive justice is being done is wrong from its foundation. Therefore, aristocratic Achilles feels that oligarchic Agamemnon is being unjust in taking away the prize he earned with his own virtuous deeds, and will withdraw himself from the battle and from serving Agamemnon.

Before we were only discussing how the honour and wealth that the Achaeans have gotten as the spoils of war should be distributed, but now we are discussing how the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon should be rectified since they both think they have been wronged. Hence, we have moved from distributive justice to rectificatory justice.

Aristotle would say that “What has been suffered has been measured, one part is the victim’s loss, and the other the offender’s profit. Hence the equal is intermediate between more and less” (1132a13-15). In Achilles and Agamemnon we see two different people trying to put these words into practice.

How the Aristotelian idea of rectificatory justice makes sense of this dispute from the perspective of Agamemnon is that he has suffered a loss in wealth because of giving up Chryseis for the sake of his troops as well as suffered a loss in honour because of the humiliation from Achilles’s words. If Agamemnon doesn’t act, Achilles will benefit
from Agamemnon’s loss in being able to keep Briseis (thus having more wealth than Agamemnon) and in gaining honour as a result of having insulted Agamemnon and gotten away with it. Agamemnon plans to rectify the
situation by taking Briseis, thus targeting Achilles specifically “So you can learn just how much greater I am than you” (1.119) and getting a prize equal to Chryseis in the form of Briseis. He says that he will also make of Achilles an example by showing what happens when people try to rival Agamemnon (1.220-21), thus restoring the reputation that Achilles damaged.

How the Aristotelian idea of rectificatory justice makes sense from the perspective of Achilles is that he has suffered the loss of Briseis as well as humiliation from Agamemnon which Agamemnon has profited from. He believes that by withdrawing himself from battle he will show just how much worse off the Achaeans are without him, thus restoring his damaged honour; “A yearning for Achilles will strike Achaea’s sons and all your armies! But then, Atrides, harrowed as you will be, nothing can you do can save you - not when your hordes of fighters drop and die, cut down by the hands of man-killing Hector!” (1.281-85).

Aristotle adds to the idea of rectificatory justice by saying that it requires a judge to resolve disputes. Parties seek the judge as an intermediary (1132a20-25). It is Nestor who witnesses this dispute and becomes the judge. He is introduced as the voice of reason because of his persuasive speech and experience: “The man of winning words, the clear speaker of Pylos. Sweeter than honey from his tongue the voice flowed on and on. Two generations of mortal men he had seen go down by now…” (1.291-93). He offers a solution to restore equality between the losses and profits of Agamemnon and Achilles and resolve the dispute as befitting an Aristotelian judge. He says that Agamemnon should leave Achilles’s girl alone on the basis that he earned her. He also says
that Achilles should not humiliate or harm his king because that does not befit the honours that a king deserves, and also says to him that Agamemnon is ultimately more powerful be
cause he rules more men. To lose Achilles would be a tremendous loss for the Greeks because “The Man stands over all Achaea’s armies” (1.320-333).

Nestor’s solution to this problem is truly a just one, and it would appear that Nestor takes into account both Agamemnon’s oligarchical view that he deserves to be honoured because he is wealthy as well as Achilles’s aristocratic view that he deserves to be honoured because he is talented/virtuous. If put into practice Achilles would keep Briseis, and thus not withdraw from the battle. At the same time Achilles must recognize that Agamemnon is ultimately his superior, which would placate the king.

King Agamemnon even recognizes that Nestor’s solution is “fit and proper” (1.335). However, unfortunately for the many Achaeans who will be killed as a result, Agamemnon and Achilles don’t follow this advice because stubbornly stick to their grudges.

What insight can we gather from Nicomachean Ethics that would shed some concluding light on who of the two Greeks is more in the right? As was stated before, one of the biggest sources of conflict between the two is that they have different perspectives on what honour should be drawn from. Achilles believes that Agamemnon should be dishonoured for being greedy and a coward - in other words, for his vices. Agamemnon believes that Achilles should be dishonoured for not knowing his place (“Have they [the gods] entitled him to hurl abuse at me?”) (1.341) - a place he has for not being as wealthy as Agamemnon. Aristotle, who consistently praises virtue and the virtuous life as the highest thing, would seem more inclined to agree with godlike Achilles. However, both men are ultimately unjust for lacking the ability to calm their rage when Nestor offers a reasonable solution to the dispute.
Works Cited
