

Why Odysseus Was Right about Persons¹

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Two quotations from the *Odyssey*, each spoken by a man about his wife: The first is from Odysseus, when he has returned at last to Ithaca after 10 years of the Trojan War and nine years of wandering. He is disguised as a beggar while he plans his battle against the suitors who are plundering his house and want to carry off his wife, Penelope. In this disguise, he speaks these words (as they appear in Robert Fitzgerald's vivid rendering) to Penelope after almost two decades:

My lady, never a man in the wide world
should have a fault to find with you. Your name
has gone out under heaven like the sweet
honor of some god-fearing king, who rules
in equity over the strong: his black lands bear
both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright
new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea
gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy
so that his folk fare well.

The second quotation is spoken by the shade of the dead king Agamemnon when Odysseus, in the course of his wanderings, encounters him in the realm of the dead. Agamemnon led the Achaeans—called the Greeks in later centuries—in their victory over Troy. But on the day of his triumphant return, he was murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra, who plotted the crime with her lover, Aegisthos. Agamemnon says of her:

Great god, I thought my children and my slaves
at least would give me welcome. But that woman,
plotting a thing so low, defiled herself
and all her sex, all women yet to come,
even those few who may be virtuous.

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And a few lines later, he warns Odysseus to be wary even of Penelope because, he says, “[t]he day of faithful wives is gone forever.”

These speeches give voice to two different ways of thinking about what it means to be a human being. For Agamemnon, his wife, Clytemnestra, is not quite an individual person. She is a member of the category *women*, and Agamemnon takes it for granted that what she did defiles all members of her category, born or unborn, whatever their individual merits might be, and also that her acts determine the acts of all other women: “The day of faithful wives is gone forever.”

He doesn’t ask whether Clytemnestra might have had uniquely personal reasons for killing him that were prompted by his own personal acts. Homer says nothing about those acts, but Aeschylus, prompted by Homer’s characterization of Agamemnon, spells them out in detail. At the start of the war, Agamemnon, intent on regaining Helen for his brother Menelaos, sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia so that his fleet could sail to Troy to recover Helen. After the war, he brought back with him the captive Trojan princess Cassandra—captive women are important to Agamemnon, both in Homer and Aeschylus—and made a point of parading her in front of Clytemnestra. As far as Agamemnon is concerned, the only relevant fact about his own murder is that he was murdered by a woman and a wife. Clytemnestra is merely a particularly bad example of two generally bad categories.

In the *Iliad*, where Agamemnon is alive, and in the *Odyssey*, where he is dead, Agamemnon can’t stop himself from talking about *women* as a class or group—he can’t stop himself from comparing one woman’s relative worth to some other woman’s relative worth. Near the start of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon says that he values the captive woman Chryseis higher than he values Clytemnestra because Chryseis is equal or superior in height, mind, and skill, all of which are measurable, objective attributes—quantifiable data—that make it possible to compare one woman to another.

Odysseus, in contrast, never thinks about what kind of woman Penelope is. He thinks about what kind of person she is. He doesn’t praise her as the finest, the most faithful, or the most virtuous example of the category *women*, which is how later centuries have tended to praise her. Instead, he praises her for being *like* someone else (some god-fearing king)—and this someone is also very different from herself (she is not a king). In his mind, she doesn’t fit into any category at all. At one point in his wanderings, the goddess Calypso, who wants to marry him and give him immortality, asks how he can possibly prefer Penelope. Calypso is puzzled because, as she says, she is *taller* than Penelope (goddesses as a category are measurably superior to women as a category). Odysseus responds that he understands this, but he

nonetheless longs for home, diplomatically changing the subject so that he needn't explain that he prefers Penelope as a person, or that Calypso bores him literally to tears (he spends every day on her island sitting by the shore and weeping).

Your name, Odysseus says to Penelope when he returns, "has gone out under heaven like the sweet / honor of some god-fearing king who rules / in equity over the strong." "Your fame," her personal glory, the unique reputation that the great male warriors fight to achieve in the *Iliad*—this is her own, unique to her own unique person. But Homer is also very pointedly likening Penelope to Odysseus: as the poem keeps reminding us, Odysseus is a god-fearing king who ruled in equity over the strong. For Odysseus, Penelope and the just king are related by analogy (they are each like the other) not by a comparison in which he and she are better than or equal to or worse than the other, as women are for Agamemnon. Agamemnon can't even think of Clytemnestra as having her own name; she is merely "she," "that woman."

Penelope, as you might expect, shares Odysseus' way of thinking about unique persons. Exactly as he values her as a unique person, so she values him as a unique person. After he defeats the suitors, she is still unwilling to accept him as her husband Odysseus (he is still in disguise) until she can be certain that he does not merely match Odysseus by objective measures such as looks and strength, but that he uniquely and inwardly is Odysseus himself. And he proves this to her by having memories that no one but Odysseus could have. For Penelope, it is not sufficient that the man sitting in her bedroom claiming to be her husband looks like Odysseus, talks like Odysseus, has a scar on his thigh like Odysseus, or kills suitors like Odysseus—as she says, an impostor or a god could fake all of these things. He proves he is Odysseus by knowing something that he alone knows, that the bed he built for his and Penelope's marriage cannot be moved because he built it from the trunk of an olive tree still rooted in the ground. Penelope accepts Odysseus because he alone shares a past with her—he alone can share with her the private secrets of their bed.

What is at stake in the contrast that Homer draws between Penelope and Odysseus on the one hand and Agamemnon on the other is, I think, also at the heart of the great ethical and political arguments of the past century. Those arguments are deeply concerned with how much to think about human beings as unique individual persons versus how much to think of them as members of categories, or as replaceable units in some hierarchy of power or status. Both ways of thinking about a human being are, of course, true. Everyone is both a unique person and one among many citizens—everyone is partly a unique self and partly an impersonal product of a culture shared by crowds of

other people. But what Odysseus and Penelope both know is that it matters a great deal which of these alternatives you focus on, the individual or the culture, the person or the category—it matters which alternative has your deepest emotional loyalty.

What is also at stake here, I think, are some of the great ethical issues that the coming century is likely to face: the ways in which human beings will conduct their lives at a time when governments and corporations increasingly make automated use of information about everyone that they gather and measure and process on their centralized servers. Though of course he doesn't use this specific word, what Agamemnon applies to women is an *algorithm*. The algorithm takes into account a set of measurable, numerical factors like height, beauty, and skill, and Agamemnon prefers whichever woman the algorithm tells him is superior to other women. I think Homer knew what he was doing when he portrayed Agamemnon getting himself killed partly because he relied on something like an algorithm, whereas Odysseus and Penelope find happiness and mutual love partly because they didn't.

One question that Homer takes seriously is the question of how much individual persons, and their unique personal choices, affect the course of events. Interestingly enough, the *Iliad* takes one view of this question, and the *Odyssey* takes an almost entirely opposite view.

First the *Iliad*. In the opening lines of the poem, Homer calls on the muse to sing to him the story of Achilles' anger and how, through the consequences of anger, "the will of Zeus was accomplished." In the *Iliad*, that is to say, what happens fulfills the will of the gods, not what human beings choose. But at moments much later in the poem, the gods declare that not even they have the freedom to choose what happens. Matters of life and death, they say, were decided by some impersonal fate or destiny and were decided a long time ago. Those matters are not in the hands of human beings acting and choosing now; they're not even in the hands of gods acting and choosing now.

But the *Odyssey* says exactly the opposite of what the *Iliad* says. The very first thing that anyone says in the *Odyssey*—and it's spoken by Zeus himself—is that human beings are always blaming the gods for their misery when it's their own folly that gives them misery beyond anything ordained by fate. Human beings are themselves responsible for what happens to them, not the gods, and what they do now decides what happens to them later.

Zeus explains this in his opening speech. Look at Aigisthos, he says: We told him not to go to bed with Clytemnestra; we told him not to murder Agamemnon; we told him what the consequences would be; we even sent down the messenger god Hermes to warn him. Aigisthos knew exactly what would happen to him if he did what we warned him not to

do, Zeus continues; we gave him good advice, but would he listen? No, and now Aigisthos is dead, and justly so. And the goddess Athena responds to Zeus's speech: "So all perish who do as he has done."

This seems to me an astonishing moment. Now, after everything that was said about the gods in the *Iliad*, they aren't playing favorites or watching destiny play itself out, and they certainly aren't thinking that one woman's act defiles all other women. Zeus and Athena are describing a moral universe in which your own free actions lead to the consequences of those actions: "So all perish who do as he has done." The consequences are inevitable—the gods can't change the consequences—but your actions are entirely the work of your personal choice at the moment you make it. And that choice is not something decided for you by the distant fates. This kind of morality is not in any way a set of rules or prescriptions. It is something like the laws of physics or chemistry: if you act in a certain way, then certain consequences follow. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote that ethics must not be a way of speaking *about* the world—it can't be an attitude, it can't be a set of moral opinions. Ethics, he said, must be "a condition of the world like logic."

What all of this means in the *Odyssey* is that the existence of individual persons thinking and acting for themselves—whether for better or for worse—is inseparable from the existence of a morally coherent universe. And to the degree that you are a unique autonomous person, you are more likely to perceive the universe as a morally coherent place. If you're a non-person, a member of a crowd, a mere product of your culture, then you won't see that moral logic: you'll imagine that what you see is merely a set of moralizing attitudes or arbitrary rules, and you'll decide that the world is, in fact, best interpreted according to the data, by applying objective, measurable algorithms.

Agamemnon values in women measurable attributes like height and skill. In himself, he values another measurable attribute, which is his social status. He is constantly worrying about whether he's going to lose status because someone else has a measurably more desirable captive, or a measurably more valuable storehouse of plunder, or measurably more power among his armies. And Homer seems to have some very strong views about the difference between thinking about oneself as a person and thinking about oneself as someone in a status hierarchy—in which it isn't who you are that matters but rather where you stand in comparison with others in the same hierarchy.

Near the start of the *Iliad*, Zeus sends a false dream to Agamemnon, telling him that he can conquer Troy this very day. When Agamemnon tells the dream to his fellow commanders, the oily old sycophant Nestor says: "Had anyone else had this dream, we would say it was a lie, but he who had the dream is the man who declares himself first among the

Greeks, so we should do as he says.” In other words, if your status is high enough and visible enough—if you’re not only first among the Greeks, but you also declare yourself first among the Greeks—then what you say must be treated as true. But of course, Agamemnon’s dream is, in fact, false.

Twenty thousand lines later, near the end of the poem, Zeus sends a true dream to Priam, king of the Trojans, telling to him to go to the Greek camp and ransom his son’s body from Achilles. Priam’s wife begs him not to do anything so reckless, but Priam answers: “Do not hinder me. Had anyone else, even a soothsayer or a priest of the gods, told me all this, I would have said it was a lie, but I myself heard the voice, I myself saw the god.” In matters of religion, Priam obeys the gods, but he won’t believe what even a priest or prophet tells him the gods have commanded. He’ll only believe what he himself has heard the gods telling him in person.

Zeus, I think, knows exactly what he is doing in the dreams he sends to Agamemnon and Priam. He sends false dreams to those who choose their lives according to measurable, public things like status, and he sends true dreams to those who judge for themselves.