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### Toulmin Argument: Odysseus Is Still a Moral Exemplar

The question of what makes a good person has always been a rather complex one. It has several different answers, none of which are really direct or based on any solid, concrete set of rules. In Aristotelian terms, however, this person is a virtuous one. Virtue Theory, as defined by Aristotle, is simply the belief that the perfect person has the natural tendency to do good things (CrashCourse). Essentially, if an individual focuses on being a good person, the right actions, regardless of the scenario, follow instinctively. In practice, this manifests as making choices in between two extremes. The art of finding the perfect balance between the two extremes, or vices, results in the practicing or building of various virtues. Amongst the many different virtues cataloged by Aristotle, the primary ones depicted in Homer's *The Odyssey* are Courage, Wisdom, and Justice. No one is perfect, and this is a fact well-acknowledged by Aristotle. In order to effectively build and expand upon these virtues, the philosopher details the role of moral exemplars, or to put it in more elementary terms: role models. These exemplars aren't perfect either but act as models because they are consistently making mistakes and learning from them, thus effectively striving to be virtuous. When practicing virtue theory, the student is never necessarily done learning. This is especially evident when speaking in terms of *The Odyssey* and Odysseus' journey home from war. Odysseus has made several mistakes and witnessed his entire crew die in various gruesome ways, among which include being eaten by Cyclops, snatched by a six-headed monster, being hit by a thunderbolt, and then being immediately ravaged by the sea.

Almost all these events occurred solely as a result of his arrogance and recklessness. As these things happen to him, however, he begins to reflect on himself as well as his actions and learns to grow from them. Odysseus qualifies as a moral exemplar because he actively practices and reflects on the three fundamental virtues of Courage, Wisdom, and Justice through his experiences and on his journey home to Ithaca. The way he responds to these events, both good and bad, allows him to progress in “perfecting” these virtues and incorporating them into his life in a way that not only affects him but the people around him as well.

The virtue of Courage is the first and foremost when discussing Odysseus. Several events showcase this feature in *The Odyssey*, but the one that best explains this virtue, if not all three, is the scene involving Polyphemus on the island of the Cyclops. Towards the beginning of his journey home, Odysseus and his men discover the cave belonging to Polyphemus on the island. The men simply suggest they steal the cheese and sheep inside of the cave and return to the sea. Odysseus, on the other hand, refuses the notion and instead insists on waiting on the Cyclops to return home so that he can properly scope out the situation. Once inside the cave and after Polyphemus’s arrival, several men are eaten by the giant and Odysseus and his crew are left thoroughly traumatized. To avoid getting his whole crew eaten, Odysseus must summon up the courage to think and act quickly, which he does. While the rest of his men are cowering in a corner, Odysseus is the only one able to actually think and act. He ends up speaking to the giant, under the guise that he’s accepted his fate as giant food. The fact that he’s even able to converse with Polyphemus after witnessing his friends and brothers become bits of spit-up gore says a lot about how much courage he had to gather up, and it is further exemplified after Odysseus draws up the plan to incapacitate the Cyclops. This virtue is mirrored by his men when they must decide who will help Odysseus blind Polyphemus. Just as they’re about to drive the stake

through the giant's eye, Odysseus acknowledges that it seemed as if "some god [had] breathed powerful courage into all of [them]" (Homer). The effect that Odysseus' thoughts and actions had on his crew is just the first example of virtue theory in practice and how they quickly look to Odysseus as the moral exemplar in this scenario.

On the flip side, however, in this same situation, Odysseus also displays the vice of Recklessness. Although it is very brief, it has the most tremendous impact out of everything that occurs in *The Odyssey* and is the basis for much of what Odysseus endures on his journey home. Just as they escape Polyphemus' cave and reach the safety of the sea, Odysseus begins taunting the cyclops, demanding that Polyphemus "say [his] eye was burned out by Odysseus," and even goes as far as to tell where he and his men have come from (Homer). This is just a lack of caution on Odysseus' part and is the most defining example of an excess of courage and the vice of recklessness, as he says it simply because he cannot keep his "warrior spirit" under control (Homer). From this, however, Odysseus learns that his actions have consequences and is able to better gauge just how courageous he needs to be, given the circumstances. This process of messing up, reflecting on it, and then experiencing a bit of personal growth is another example of what qualifies Odysseus as a moral exemplar.

Wisdom is perhaps one of Odysseus's most defining traits, and in *The Odyssey*, the virtue he is often associated with. Using the scenario with Polyphemus as an example once more, we see that there are various instances where this virtue is highlighted. The most evident of them all though would be the moment where Odysseus uses his cleverness to trick the Cyclops into believing that his actual name is Nobody. This occurs as Odysseus offers Polyphemus multiple glasses of wine and begins to initiate the plan to incapacitate him. After the giant is blinded, it results in the other Cyclops not taking Polyphemus seriously while he yells out in agony that

“Nobody is killing [him],” and that it is due to his wit and wordplay, or “by treachery,” as the giant affectionately calls it (Homer). In the midst of this, Odysseus is still thinking of ways to get out of Polyphemus’ cave safely with the remainder of his men and eventually comes up with the idea to escape with the sheep once the Cyclops takes them out in the morning. The effect of this clever scheme to flee the murderous intent of Polyphemus is that Odysseus, along with his men, ends up being able to make it to the shore of the Cyclops’ island and out into the safety of the sea. Throughout all of this, Odysseus’ men watch and follow orders from him since he is the only one among them that can come up with any sort of plan effective enough to ensure that they’re not all killed. Although he does risk all of their lives once they’re out at sea by taunting Polyphemus, Odysseus eventually comes to his senses and is able to determine just how wise he needs to be in that specific situation. As a moral exemplar, he can recognize the unnecessary setbacks that taunting Polyphemus caused, and sets sail soon after with his newfound knowledge.

Once Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca, he is tested once more. This time, however, the virtue in question is that of Justice. For much of Homer’s *The Odyssey*, his palace in Ithaca has been full of men eager to get with his wife, Penelope. To make things even worse, these suitors often challenge the authority of Odysseus’s son Telemachus, and overall, just wreak havoc upon everything and everyone in their immediate vicinity. As Odysseus gradually makes his way home, he is disguised as a beggar and learns of everything that has been going on in his absence. Once he reaches his palace, he is treated like scum by the suitors and even has a stool thrown at him. Using these brief but impactful experiences, Odysseus begins to make the judgment call on what must be done to restore order to Ithaca. He takes the time to decide whether the suitors and those who aided in their endeavors deserve forgiveness, and in that manner, it is apparent that the virtue of Justice is one that he already actively reflects on and thinks about. The suitors have

disrespected Odysseus not only by trying to bed his wife but by plotting to kill his son as well. Given these circumstances, it is clear why Odysseus concludes that vengeance is the route that must be followed. In this scenario, it is easy to identify who Odysseus directly affects as a moral exemplar. Telemachus looks up to his father and follows his orders throughout the slaughter of the suitors and the maids who slept with them. In return, his own perception of virtuous justice begins to take shape, and Odysseus expands upon his notions of it.

As one reads through *The Odyssey*, it is clear that Odysseus makes several mistakes on his way home to Ithaca, and one could blame him for all the troubles that he experiences.

However, more often than not, the reader finds that Odysseus is quick to find ways to learn from his errors and correct them. In this way, it is quite easy to see how Virtue Theory and Aristotle's idea of the perfect man can be applied to the hero. A moral exemplar is never done learning from their faults, and as a result, is constantly reflecting upon their thoughts and actions

(CrashCourse). By doing so, they build upon and gain knowledge of the various virtues, among which include Courage, Wisdom, and Justice. This can be seen in Odysseus at several points throughout the epic, with one of the strongest examples being during his encounter Polyphemus. The events that occurred during his time on the island of the Cyclops are among which are necessary for his progression along the path to virtuousness. In the article "Virtue through Challenge," the importance of traumatic experiences such as those are further explained as being essential to a change in moral outlook (Miller). Similarly, Odysseus had to be broken and battered before he humbled himself enough to properly analyze his mistakes and improve himself from there, and the same process is still required for most people today to address their faults. Although it is on a much lesser scale, building virtue in the twenty-first century occurs through trial and error just as it did in *The Odyssey*.

Keeping in mind the numerous mistakes that Odysseus has made throughout the epic, many of which result in the gruesome death of the people around him, it is easy to argue that a virtuous man is one that would not allow such things to happen and, therefore, Odysseus should not be given the role of moral exemplar. As mentioned before, however, the actual practice of Virtue Theory plays out differently than as conceptualized by Aristotle. In real life, the development of the correct traits, or in Aristotelian terms, virtues, comes through mistakes such as those made by Odysseus. In the present day, this would account for simple ethical mistakes such as lying to get out of doing that is slightly inconveniencing, but during the era of gods and beasts, these faults were much more noticeable and dangerous. They were also much more traumatizing and capable of inciting the personal growth necessary to continue progressing through the different stages of virtuousness. Odysseus did display the vices of recklessness and arrogance, especially evident during his taunting of Polyphemus, but after facing the consequences of his actions and realizing that he has unintentionally doomed a majority of the people closest to him, he learns to act in accordance to his strengthened virtues. This can be seen as he becomes more cautious and less brash upon his return to Ithaca, especially as he takes his time to assess how he should restore order to his home, which has been disrespected and destroyed in his absence.

To conclude, throughout *The Odyssey*, the virtues of Courage, Wisdom, and Justice are the three that are consistently seen in Odysseus' actions. Even before his journey home from war, Odysseus had always been considered a natural standard of the Greek moral exemplar. Through his experiences on his way back to Ithaca, however, the way he practices and builds upon these virtues is greatly detailed in the mistakes he makes along the way and how he learns from them. Given the context of Greece at the time, Odysseus still qualifies as a recognizable

moral exemplar under Aristotelian standards, and it is reflected by the sheer amount of people he impacts throughout his journey.

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**Your (Joshlin's) Position**

**Opposition's Position**