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ENGL 1301-49190

3/10/2020

Toulmin Argument: The Three Modes of Odysseus' Selfishness

In **Crash Course's** video "Aristotle and Virtue Theory", they explain how the virtue theory is an ethical theory that emphasizes an individual's character rather than following a set of rules, meaning if we become good people than we will do good things. After reading **Homer's** *The Odyssey*, we can see that the main character, Odysseus, according to the virtue theory chart, shows little signs of being properly balanced. He is always going overboard due to his need for power, fame, and greed for self-benefit. He knowingly takes things too far for the possibility of his own self-gain. Many examples in the story prove Odysseus' worst quality is his selfishness whether it be his extreme need for recognition or his need for being the best or as Homer says, "Godlike". Even though he shows a small hint of humility in Book 6 of *The Odyssey* he later proves that he will never change his ways. **Many believe that Odysseus is a selfless hero** but, in my opinion, he is quite the opposite, showing throughout the story his complete lack of altruism and, proves he cannot control his overbearing selfishness.

One example of how Odysseus exhibits his selfishness is his frequent acts of adultery. His infidelity is strictly for the purpose of his own self-benefit; otherwise, he would not have felt the need to hide these affairs from his beloved wife Penelope. In the middle of **Homer's** *The Odyssey*, Book 10, Odysseus and his men travel upon Circe's island where she uses her magic powers to transform his crew from men into swine. With the help of the messenger, Hermes, Odysseus is able to avoid being turned into a swine himself, leaving Circe amazed. Odysseus

was to lay intimately with the Goddess in order for the curse to be lifted off of his men. After the men were freed, Odysseus continued to take pleasure in sharing a bed with Circe; therefore, he delays their journey for over year to remain on her island, never once asking his men if they wanted to stay or if they needed to get back home to their wives and children. After he had satisfied his pleasure enough, he decided to head back to sea towards the Land of the Dead. In a later event of the story, Odysseus landed on Calypso's island after a large storm created by Zeus struck his ship and killed every last one of his crew members. Calypso provides nourishment and shelter for Odysseus. He stayed on that island for seven years straight, never even trying to escape home. He was completely satisfied with staying on Calypso's island and might have continued to stay on that island until the day he died if the goddess Athena had not stepped in. He claimed that he loved his family, but if he loved them more than he loved his own personal desires, he would have left that island years ago and saved his wife.

Power to control others is also a disconcerting quality that showcases Odysseus' selfishness. During Odysseus' trip to the Land of the Dead, Teiresias, a blind prophet of Apollo in Thebes, informs Odysseus of his prophecy. Teiresias explains in Homer's *The Odyssey*, Book Eleven,

“Glorious Odysseus, you ask about your honey-sweet return. But a god will make your journey bitter. As soon as you've escaped the dark blue sea and reached the island of Thrinacia in your sturdy ship, you'll find grazing there the cattle and rich flocks of Helios, who hears and watches over everything. If you leave them unharmed and keep your mind on your return, you may reach Ithaca, though you'll have trouble. But if you touch them, then I foresee destruction for your crew, for you, and for your ship.”

Odysseus then neglects to inform his men of their fates, for if what Teiresias had stated in the prophecy became a certainty, the men might not have chosen to accompany Odysseus on the rest of his journey proving yet again Odysseus' selfishness. Odysseus finally felt that it was now more important to get to his family as soon as possible rather than protect his men from certain death. This is why he does not advise his men of what Teiresias' prophecy foretold. If his men had known what was to become of their future on the island of Thrinacia, they may not have asked to land there. Odysseus hides the truth from his men not once but twice in order to feel a false sense of power. Around the beginning of Book 10 in **Homer's** *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew land on the island called Aeolia where Aeolus gives him a bag full of wind to help him during his journey home. Odysseus demands power; thus, he keeps what was in the bag a secret leading the men to curiosity. They thought he was hiding gold and other treasures inside the bag, so they schemed to steal the bag from Odysseus once he fell asleep. They successfully retrieved the bag, but when they opened it, all of the winds flew from the bag knocking the ship off the course of their home. Now yes, it was partially the men's fault for opening the bag, but it is also their leaders' fault for if Odysseus had just told them what was inside, their curiosity would not have led them to open the bag. The reason he does not tell his men what was in the bag was his need for power. The secret makes him feel like he has more control and knows more than his men, making him act and seem selfish.

The last example of Odysseus' selfishness is his exceeding need for fame. Odysseus has a dangerous curiosity on how to gain recognition. It is okay to be curious, and many are, but it's not okay when we let our curiosity get the better of us. Odysseus knew if he let his curiosity take control, he would be risking his men's lives, but he still lets it get the best of him. An example of this is when he and his men are passing by the beautiful singing sirens. Odysseus felt compelled

to hear them for when he came home, he could be known as the first man to ever listen to the sirens sing and live. He had his men plug their ears with wax and then tie him around a post on the ship so he could listen to the sirens sing as they passed Anthemoessa. Never once did his men's safety cross Odysseus' mind. For all we know, he could have escaped the rope he was tied to and steered the boat towards the sirens, killing not just him but his men as well. Thank the gods nothing happened. His men were very cautious and even tied Odysseus tighter when he begged to be set free. Another time he notices an opportunity for fame is when they land on the County of the Cyclops. He takes some of his men with him to collect supplies when he runs into a humongous cave. He and his men steal all of the supplies that were inside the cave, but as they were walking out of the cave, Odysseus told them to stay inside the cave with him. Odysseus was eager to see if the Cyclops would provide them hospitality. Later that evening the Cyclops discovered Odysseus and his men, trapping all of them in his cave and devouring his men. After they had escaped Odysseus shares his name with the Cyclops leading to his own downfall. The Cyclops curses his men to die and for Odysseus to get home extremely late. If Odysseus hadn't had let his curiosity get in the way in the beginning, he would not have lost all of his men and arrived home exceptionally late. In Book 9, after Odysseus and the remainder of his men escape the Cyclops named Polyphemus, Odysseus shares his name with Polyphemus with the expectation that when he was asked who defeated him, the monster would reply that it was Lord Odysseus the son of Laertes. Instead, Odysseus found out that Polyphemus was the son of Poseidon and the monster then cursed him and his crew. Odysseus reveals his name for the sake of his own benefit. If others knew that Odysseus was the man who defeated Polyphemus, he would be famous; at least that's what he was going for. Unfortunately, Odysseus doesn't truly care for anyone else but himself and because of this, he runs into all sorts of difficulties.

Yes, one could say that Odysseus displayed selfless acts. For example, Odysseus demonstrated an act of selflessness when he helped the Achaeans fight during the Trojan War. In doing so he supplies ships and warriors to help his neighboring friend save his wife. Odysseus also exhibits somewhat of true altruism when he risks his and his men's lives in order to save his loved ones. When he arrives home, he finds that his wife had been burdened by the suitor's lack of respect and their plan to kill his son, Telemachus. Odysseus was benevolent in some circumstances, but the main reason for doing so was to satisfy his hunger for violence which was shown during the killing of the suitors. When Odysseus got home, he slaughtered all of the suitors for justice, for what they did towards his kingdom, son, and wife. However, although he may have served what he felt was justice after the killing of the suitors, he later loses control of his emotions and succumbs to his instinctual malicious nature. This is then shown again after the slaughtering, when he murdered all of the maidservants that were involved in relationships with the suitors and later goes about killing all of the suitors' relatives. He does this out of anger and revenge, not just for others, but mainly himself, proving just how egoistic of a man he is. Odysseus seems to never be able to fully change his excessive selfishness thus killing his crew and causing his family to grieve. As stated in the article "Self-Centered at Heart" by Peter W. Marty, "Persistent selfishness erodes our moral ability and willingness to share with others. Regardless of how creative, bright, or courageous we may be, our penchant for loving ourselves and favoring our own group or tribe threatens to overpower our capacity for benevolence." In other words, even if we start off as good people, if we continue to commit selfish acts for selfish reasons, then we will "erode" being good people.

Homer's *The Odyssey* is a very good story to read if one is yearning for the motivation to be less narcissistic. One of the worst things anyone can do is be very self-centered but that is

exactly what Odysseus does in this story. No matter how many odysseys Odysseus lives through, it is extremely clear that he will never give up his sin of pride. *The Odyssey* is all about Odysseus and his egocentricity and how it affects not only himself but everyone else around him. He is hungry for the power and fame that will lead him to be one of the most self-regarding men in Ithaca. Although he is strong, brave, and intelligent, he uses his many talents for the benefits of himself while pretending it is to help others. But one could say this about anyone. As said in “History, Power, Communication, Journalism: Beyond the ‘Traditional’ Critical Approach,” by Ramón Reige, “The western citizen is not completely unaware of [his] selfishness, whether it is positive or destructive behavior, in various formats and in varying degrees.” Like Odysseus, we may not consider the consequences of our actions, with reactions based on personal desire and not on the consideration of others. However, although we are all selfish by nature, we can still make the choice to either be a good or bad person, and hopefully choose more good than bad.

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Your (Navi’s) Position

Opposition’s Position