

Navi Mailloux

Dr. Rufel Ramos

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Exemplification with Causal Analysis: The Three Modes of Odysseus' Selfishness

In **Crash Course's** video "Aristotle and Virtue Theory", they explain how 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 then 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. Odysseus' negative qualities greatly outweigh those of his positive qualities, but his most damning quality is his 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.

Thus, *The Odyssey* is a very good story to read if one is wanting to be motivated to not be selfish. One of the worst things anyone can do is be selfish, 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 selfishness. *The Odyssey* is all about Odysseus and his selfishness and how it affects not only himself but everyone else around him. He is hungry for power and fame leading him to be one of the most selfish men in Ithaca and also the world. Odysseus does not consider the consequences of his actions. His reactions are based on personal desire and not on the consideration of others.

Works Cited

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