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RECKLESS  
RATIONALISM AND  
HEROIC REVERENCE  
IN HOMER'S  
ODYSSEY

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*A decision-theoretic analysis of the central incident of Homer's Odyssey reveals the insufficiency of rational calculation as a guide for political prudence. Surprisingly, the poet distinguishes between two rational and formally identical calculations in no uncertain terms: he condemns one as utter recklessness and praises the other as consummate wisdom. I maintain that this discrepancy is neither an artifact of sloppy editorial patchwork nor the result of a "homeric nod" but instead points toward a politically significant distinction as yet obscured by a merely rationalistic perspective. The recklessness of Odysseus' crewmen, who deliberately slaughter sacred cattle to forestall starvation, consists in their rationalistic transgression of the limits of reason. These limits are most evident in the defiance of commensurability that characterizes the sacred. The wisdom of Odysseus, by contrast, is manifest in his learning to temper reason with respect for the sacred. By virtue of reverence, Odysseus wins his struggle to preserve his psychê, home and regime.*

Homer's epic poems have attracted little attention among modern students of politics for many reasons, not the least of which is the argument that these works are adverse or, at best, irrelevant to contemporary liberal democracy. To be sure, Homer's politics are tribal, localized, and monarchical, while our own is pluralistic, continental, and democratic. Moreover, certain qualities of character celebrated in the poems, which consequently stimulate emulation in the reader, may be of dubious value as equipment for democratic citizenship. One thinks instantly of the magnificent thirst for glory that virtually epitomizes the Homeric hero but which in modern times has come to be regarded as nothing less than political dynamite. Tocqueville (1945, 2:63), for example, warns against the study of such "aristocratic" literature, as having "no bearing on [democratic] social and political

needs," but tending rather to lead its enthusiasts to "perturb the state in the name of the Greeks and the Romans, instead of enriching it with their productive industry." Thus the great commentator on the American polity would question the vitality of any democratic regime bent on nursing a race of would-be Achilleis. In response to this legitimate and public-spirited concern, I intend to expound a central, though neglected, lesson of Homer's *Odyssey* that is both relevant and beneficial to liberal democracy. I hope to do so, moreover, in a manner that Tocqueville, one of the great critics of rationalism in politics, would himself find persuasive.

As I see it, the contribution of the *Odyssey* to liberal democracy consists principally in its critique of rationalism. By rationalism I mean the presumption of the ultimate hegemony of reason in the constitution of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Hayek (1960, chap. 4), Oakeshott

(1962, 1-36), and Gilder (1981, pt. 3) have made significant contributions toward identifying the precise character of the threat posed by rationalism to liberal democracy. But their common root lies in Tocqueville's (1945, 1:12) trenchant observation that "[political] liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." Despite such warnings, contemporary rationalists remain undaunted. Much of the Law and Economics movement, for example, is directed toward establishing legal principles on grounds of efficiency, as if economic calculations of social wealth had more authority than "self-evident" inalienable rights (Posner 1977; Rubin 1977; cf. Aranson 1984). The philosophical underpinning of this rationalistic counteroffensive is most powerfully expressed by Rawls (1955). Rawls attempts simultaneously to vindicate morality and to establish the ultimate authority of reason by subsuming the particular instance (or "act") of moral propriety, in which utilitarian considerations are agreed not to be decisive, under a general practice ("rule") which, he claims, enjoys a utilitarian authorization. The pious acts of a believer whose faith is secured by Pascal's wager would, I think, perfectly exemplify Rawls's argument. If pious acts are tenable on this rationalistic basis, it would follow that the last link in Tocqueville's contention is false. But Hayek's (1976, 17-23) critique of rule utilitarianism may be understood as calling Pascal's bluff. Hayek notes that the consequences of observing a particular rule will vary as the constellation of other practices observed in society varies -- even at the margin. But the utilitarian warrant for one such constellation of contextual practices over another is by no means evident. Owing to the sheer complexity of society, Hayek argues, utilitarians can never give a sufficient reason for a particular rule because any calculation of its consequences must *make assumptions* concerning the contextual practices that in part determine its utility. The same point applies to Pascal's wager: apart from a *prior faith* in a divine

providence that has prepared Heaven as a place of reward for the righteous and Hell as a place of punishment for the unrighteous (and not the reverse), the wager—and moral propriety—is by no means compellingly rational. It appears that there is something to Tocqueville's contention after all.

This result will not surprise students of political philosophy. In lectures published posthumously, Leo Strauss (1979, 1981) cogently argues that "philosophy has never refuted revelation." He identifies the conflict between Greek philosophy and biblical revelation as "the secret of the vitality of Western civilization" and recommends that philosophers remain "open to the challenge of theology." If Strauss is correct, there is no warrant for assuming the comprehensive sovereignty of reason. One wonders, however, how the Greek philosophers, whom Strauss holds in the highest regard, might have lived up to his standard, lacking as they did access to the biblical revelation. In Homer's critique of rationalism, I believe, we shall find a nonbiblical influence that may help account for the recognition among subsequent Greek philosophers of the limits of reason.

In the *Odyssey* Homer intends<sup>2</sup> to elevate Odysseus to a rank at least equal to that of the illustrious Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*. He presents the case for Odysseus' superiority by recounting the harrowing, though ultimately successful, return of Odysseus to home and throne after the Trojan War. Odysseus' adventures, the obstacles he confronts and overcomes in winning his return, summon the special excellences that define him as a hero. The most celebrated of these excellences is, of course, Odysseus' remarkable intelligence. But the most critical of these excellences, I shall argue, is reverence. By *reverence* I mean the correct perception of and respect for the sacred, which by its nature defies rational commensuration. As we shall see, it is by virtue of reverence that Odysseus resists certain temptations to rationalistic excess that would otherwise arrest his heroic return.

The commentators have not, in my view, paid sufficient attention to the important strain of antirationalism implicit in the poet's celebration of Odysseus' heroic reverence. On the contrary, they regard Odysseus' greatness as consisting exclusively in his intellectual resourcefulness. Even the most insightful resolve the age-old controversy -- as to who, Achilles or Odysseus, is the "best of the Achaians" -- in simple terms of brains versus brawn, shrewdness versus honor, or guile versus force (Clay 1983, 96-112; Nagy 1979, 35-58; Stanford 1985, chap.5). It is a commonplace among homeric scholars that one finds crafty intelligence first elevated to heroic respectability in the *Odyssey*. It is true that Odysseus' characteristic reliance on wily tricks and clever deceptions is scorned in the earlier *Iliad* (see, e.g., 9.312-13), but this scorn reflects the view of Odysseus' peers at Troy more than that of the poet. But if Odysseus' intelligence is not unappreciated in the *Iliad*, neither does it provide the basis for his heroic elevation in the *Odyssey*. The most pervasive evidence suggests that Odysseus is unable by cleverness alone to compete successfully for heroic honors with the less versatile but nobler Achilles. Odysseus' extraordinary intelligence is amply evident throughout the *Iliad*, and yet the poet devotes that work to the heroic pre-eminence of Achilles.<sup>3</sup> It would seem that insofar as Odysseus' distinctiveness depends exclusively on the scope of his intellect he must remain eclipsed by Achilles. To rival the *Iliad*, that is, to reveal the superiority of its own hero, the *Odyssey* must do more than simply catalogue the further exploits of the wily Odysseus. A fresh study of this work will, I believe, reveal that Homer does not rest Odysseus' heroic credentials upon a twice-told tale of brains versus brawn. In the *Odyssey*, he takes a different tack. Homer chronicles the development in Odysseus of reverence, which moderates and thus guides his remarkable intellectual prowess. Thus, in contrast to the view currently prevalent among homeric scholars, I hope to show that it is not chiefly the resourcefulness of

Odysseus' intellect but rather his recognition of its limits that settles the Ithakan's claim to an epic poem of his own.

### **Up from Rationalism: Odysseus as Epic Hero**

To appreciate Odysseus' development into a hero of truly epic caliber, one must first of all reckon with the poet's opening allusion to Odysseus' sacrilegious plundering of the sacred temples of Troy (1.1-2). Evidently, the resourceful Odysseus proves to be very much the "typical hero" at Troy, employing the most brutal force for the sake of self-aggrandizement. Odysseus' outrage calls to mind Achilles' mutilation of Hector's corpse, which likewise manifested a heroic spiritedness unquenchable even in final victory (*Iliad* 24.14-22). As a hero of this conventional sort, however, Odysseus cannot surpass the glorious Achilles. Indeed, Odysseus' name is not even mentioned in the poet's prologue (cf. *Iliad* 1.1). Only in the balance of the *Odyssey*, which recounts Odysseus' experiences after his departure from Troy, does the Ithakan king truly come into his own. The poet prefaces this disclosure, however, by introducing the Odysseus that was -- an Odysseus who was, if anything, the opposite of reverent.

As the prologue continues, we learn that Odysseus did not persist in this irreverence. On the Island of Thrinakia, in the course of his return to Ithaka, Odysseus stood alone against his mates' violation of the sacred cattle of the sun god, Helios. As a result the men perish, we are told, while Odysseus alone succeeds in returning to Ithaka. If, as the Thrinakian episode suggests, Odysseus' late-blossoming reverence is an important component of his heroic excellence, then Odysseus' full claim to rival Achilles will come to light only as the narration of the *Odyssey* unfolds. Only there, and nowhere else, will we learn how the irreverent swashbuckler from Ithaka came to be remarkable above all for his godly reverence.<sup>4</sup> It is, accordingly, in hope of better understanding this surprising

development that the poet invokes his divine Muse (1.1-10):

Sing through me, Muse, of that versatile man,  
who so far  
strayed when he ravaged Troy's holy citadel.  
Though he saw the cities and came to know the  
mind of many men,  
in his heart he suffered many pains at sea  
as he strove to win his soul and his mates'  
return.  
But he could not save his mates, though he  
longed to.  
On their own they perished an account of their  
own recklessness,  
the fools. The cattle of exalted Helios  
they devoured, and He took away the day of  
their return.  
Tell us of these things, from somewhere,  
Goddess, daughter of Zeus.<sup>5</sup>

Odysseus' return to Ithaca is not merely a topographical achievement. As we gather from the prologue, Odysseus undergoes a radical change of heart in the course of his wanderings. This change, I suggest, is the focal issue of the *Odyssey*. It is significant that Homers Muse responds to his prayer to begin "from somewhere" by guiding him in a reordering of episodes that breaks with strict chronology (cf. 23.310-38). Homer begins "in the midst of things," narrating some events as they unfold and others by means of flashback. As a consequence of this reordering, the poet achieves a literary "hat trick": the tale of the Thrinakian crime and punishment is positioned literally at the center of the poem, at the rhetorical climax of Odysseus' tale to the Phaiakians and at the threshold of his return to Ithaca. Thus the architecture of the *Odyssey* indicates a remarkable poetic investment in the Thrinakian adventure and, accordingly, in the lesson that we are meant to draw from it.

Nevertheless, the importance of Thrinakia is commonly depreciated by the commentators. Even the most scrupulous, whose watchword is "to interpret Homer out of Homer," find it difficult to take Helios' cattle seriously. Jenny Strauss Clay (1983), for example, holds against Homer and in

favor of the "fundamental innocence" of Odysseus' shipmates (p. 230). She maintains that the poet's judgment that the crewmen lost their lives through their own responsibility is not "borne out by the account of the destruction of Odysseus' men later in the *Odyssey*" (p. 36). Perhaps it is supposed that by acts of recklessness (*atasthaliai*) Homer necessarily refers to conduct lacking deliberate and rational consideration. When one discovers that the crewmen's slaughter of the sacred cattle does not issue from thoughtless impulse but is startlingly well reasoned, it is natural to question the validity of Homer's indictment. In my view, the best response to this tendency is to make the Thrinakian episode the centerpiece of a fresh examination of the *Odyssey*. On this basis I shall try to show how Homer's account in fact establishes the culpable recklessness of the crewmen and substantiates the dawn of reverence in Odysseus.

Doubt will remain, however, as to the heroic standing of Odysseus' reverence -- which sets him in opposition to his crewmen -- as long as it remains unclear that the crewmen's decision to slaughter sacred cattle, despite its rationality, is utterly reckless. Our task is further complicated, however, by the discovery that Odysseus later arrives at a similarly rational decision, inducing Athena -- the goddess of wisdom -- to certify and praise his good judgment (13.290-98). As we shall see, Odysseus and his shipmates adopt formally equivalent decisions, each choosing what game theorists call the *dominant* strategy. Nevertheless, Homer distinguishes between the two identically dominant strategies in no uncertain terms, condemning one as reckless and praising the other for its wisdom. As matters stand, therefore, we understand neither the grounds upon which the poet condemns the recklessness of the crewmen's rational choice nor those upon which he makes Athena commend Odysseus' good Judgment. If we are to learn what, in Homer's estimation, makes the man Odysseus truly heroic, it is necessary to

probe deeper into the details of each of the decisions to determine on what basis they might properly be distinguished.

### **Homer's Ambivalence Toward Rational Choice**

Odysseus' shipmates learn of the prohibition against slaughtering Helios' cattle from Odysseus, who heard it first from the prophet Teiresias and then from the sorceress Kirke, the daughter of Helios (11.110-15; 12.137-41). It was by direction of Kirke that Odysseus set out for the underworld to consult with the soul of the departed Teiresias concerning the necessary provisions for his return to Ithaka (10.490-95). At the brink of Hades, he encounters the famous seer. Teiresias tells Odysseus that if he hopes to win his return he must above all be willing "to check [his] heart" (*thymon erykakeein*, 11.105). Teiresias specifically cautions Odysseus about Thrinakia. No matter what, Odysseus and his men must leave unmolested the herds of Helios, which roam there. For any who violate the sanctity of Helios' cattle, Teiresias prophesies doom. Teiresias' warning admonishes Odysseus unmistakably to control his appetite. But this interpretation does not exhaust the significance of the prophecy. The full range of meaning of the word *thymos* requires a more comprehensive interpretation. Thus, Odysseus must not merely control his desire for food but, more importantly, his *furor*, or love of fame. What Teiresias demands is literally an all-encompassing "change of heart." Odysseus' conduct on the island of Thrinakia is the acid test of a more encompassing change of heart that Teiresias prophesies as the key to Odysseus' final return.

It is after an especially harrowing day's sailing that Odysseus and his men finally disembark at Thrinakia. Although the Ithakans escape the Sirens' treachery unscathed,<sup>6</sup> they are not nearly so fortunate in their subsequent navigation of the narrow strait between Skylla and Kharybdis. In order to skirt the lethal vortex of Kharybdis,

the relentless whirlpool, the Ithakans must sail close under an opposing cliff, the dwelling of the unspeakably monstrous Skylla. Skylla snatches six men from the deck of the passing ship. As the ship races on, the crewmen witness what Odysseus calls the most grievous spectacle of their journey: the writhing and screaming of their helpless comrades as Skylla devours them alive (12.255-59). At last achieving a safe distance, Odysseus' haggard crew compel him to make for port (12.297). The nearest island is Thrinakia. As he submits, Odysseus informs his men of the warnings of Teiresias and bids them to swear an oath under no circumstances to violate Helios' sacred cattle. The men vow to leave the herds unmolested and go ashore.

That very night a tremendous storm sweeps across Thrinakia. Inauspicious winds trap the Ithakans on the island for a month. It takes considerably less time than that, however, for the men to exhaust their meager stores. They turn in desperation to fishing and hunting fowl, but without success. Hunger wears them down. Acknowledging finally his own lack of resource -- a critical step for "the man of many ways" (*andra ... polytropon*, 1.1) -- Odysseus leaves his men to seek guidance from the gods (12.333-34; cf. 12.38). In his absence, the crewmen "Hatch a wicked plot" to satisfy their hunger by slaughtering Helios' cattle. Eurylochos, Odysseus' second in command, addresses the men in terms they find irresistibly persuasive (12.339-52):

"Heed my words, mates, for you have been  
ill-used!  
And deaths are hateful to wretched mortals,  
but to die of hunger is the most piteous way  
to meet one's fate.  
Let us, then, carry off the best of Helios'  
cattle . . .  
But if, in his rage for his straight-horned cattle,  
He would have our ship destroyed, and other  
gods back him up,  
then I heartily prefer to die at once inhaling a  
wave  
than to waste to death on a desert island."

So said Eurylochos. and the other mates agreed.

Eurylochos' speech invites his mates to compare the respective consequences of reverencing and of violating Helios' cattle. Whatever the men decide, Eurylochos notes that there are two, and only two, possibilities. Either the other gods make common cause and honor Helios' claim to punish anyone who harms his cattle or they

do not. What makes Eurylochos' argument so persuasive is his revealing that, in *either* of these possible circumstances, breaking the oath and slaughtering the cattle is the superior choice. This is perhaps most easily seen with reference to the decision matrix In Table 1, which is constructed directly out of the alternatives and consequences as they are formulated in the text.

**Table 1. The Rational Choice of Odysseus' Comrades**

| Strategies              | Circumstances  |  |
|-------------------------|--|--|
|                         | The gods fail to cooperate:<br>Crime goes unpunished | The gods cooperate:<br>Crime is punished |
| Violate the sacred cows | Feast scot-free*                                     | Die (quickly) at sea                     |
| Respect the sacred cows | Slow death by starvation                             | Slow death by starvation                 |

Note. Significantly, there is no text to support the composition of a similar decision matrix for Odysseus.

\*Eurylochos assuages any guilt feelings the men might otherwise associate with this outcome by promising to erect and equip a temple to Helios when they return to Ithaka (12.345-47).

It is Eurylochos' contention that the men will be better off acting as he recommends, regardless whether the other gods honor Helios' claim against them, as we see from the table. If the gods should fail to cooperate in punishing the men -- such divisiveness among the gods is not unprecedented, as any veteran of the Trojan campaign knows -- then slaughtering the cattle is clearly preferable to the alternative. In this case, the men will satisfy their hunger and pay no penalty whatever. But if, on the other hand, the gods should cooperate in their punishment, then slaughtering the cattle is *still* preferable to the alternative; for then their violation can be expected to result in a quick death, after a fine meal, instead of a slow death "by inches." No matter which circumstance actually comes to pass, then, the crewmen are better off slaughtering the sacred cattle. Whenever any strategy enjoys this superiority over all its alternatives in every possible circumstance, game theorists

describe it as "dominant" (Owen 1983, 22-33). Of course, dominant strategies are not always available, but when one is available it would appear almost unthinkable to choose anything else.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of the crewmen's choice, however, the poet of the *Odyssey* would seem to disagree. Homer condemns their rational choice as utterly reckless (1.7, 12.300). By what right can one assert the "utter recklessness" of a rationally dominant strategy? Or are we simply to dismiss the poet as a rank misologist? The answer to this question is emphatically no. Homer's sympathetic treatment of dear reasoning is manifest throughout the work. But perhaps nowhere is it so evident as when Athena praises Odysseus as "by far the best of all mortals in counsel" for his resolve in concealing his identity (13.297-98). The significance of Odysseus' ironic dissimulation, particularly in its departure from the customary behavior of the "typical

hero," should be carefully noted. As against his earlier preoccupation with glory and self-aggrandizement, Odysseus now contrives all manner of means, even adopting the guise of a beggar, to remain hidden.

Odysseus evidently arrives at his decision to conceal himself upon learning from the shade of Agamemnon, which he encounters in Hades after his consultation with Teiresias, of the extraordinary dangers that may attend a hero's homecoming (11.387-466). Agamemnon's horrific tale of betrayal and murder discloses the full dimensions of the danger that Odysseus, too, may face. Agamemnon's wife, Klytemnestra, was seduced by Aigisthos while Agamemnon fought at Troy. Although Klytemnestra initially resisted Aigisthos' advances, she finally yielded and conspired in a plot to murder her husband upon his return. Agamemnon's shade recounts the awful details to Odysseus and bitterly urges him to keep his identity a secret, not to reveal himself completely even to Penelope.

It is clear from the sequel that Odysseus takes Agamemnon's advice to heart. Odysseus grows exceedingly careful, manufacturing the most artful deceptions in responding to questions concerning his whereabouts. In his first encounter with strangers (the Phaiakians) after conversing with Agamemnon, Odysseus is extraordinarily reticent and evasive concerning his true identity -- notwithstanding the remarkable hospitality being extended him (cf. 7.237-39; with 8.28, 8.548-55, and 9.19-21; see also 9.504-5). A short time later, after his hosts have graciously conducted him to Ithaka, Odysseus meets the goddess Athena in the guise of a young shepherd. When asked who he is, Odysseus again dissembles, concealing his identity to gain an advantage in information (13.375-97). Athena, who has kept her distance from Odysseus since his sacrilege at Troy at last reveals herself and, as we have seen, praises Odysseus' good judgment in keeping himself concealed.

Athena brings Odysseus up to date on the situation in Ithaka. Suitors for the hand of

Penelope have established themselves in Odysseus' home and recklessly consume his property. Odysseus, of course, is put in mind immediately of Agamemnon, whose fate he is determined not to share. Instead, he resolves to keep his identity hidden. He poses as an old beggar, returns secretly to his palace, and, with the advantage of surprise (and a little help from his son Telemachos and two loyal herdsmen), kills all 108 suitors. Odysseus' mission is one of the most thrilling in all of literature, owing largely to the overwhelming odds he faces and, hence, to the nearly unendurable suspense that attends every stage of his operation. The element of surprise, and thus secrecy, is absolutely imperative for his success. Clearly, then Odysseus' heroic return to home and throne depends on his willingness to conceal his identity. The good sense of his decision to do so is nearly self-evident, though it should be noted that such self-effacing concealment is at odds with the customary behavior of homeric heroes. Table 2, constructed exclusively from alternatives and consequences described in the text, indicates the rational superiority of Odysseus' choice.

It is clear that Odysseus' best choice is to conceal his identity. Whether Penelope remains faithful or is unfaithful, Odysseus will better maintain the crucial element of surprise by not divulging his whereabouts. In the event that Penelope has betrayed him, Odysseus can expect to suffer the same fate as Agamemnon if he announces his presence; but he can guard against this by concealing his identity rather than walking directly into the suitors' trap as Agamemnon did (11.409-15). Of course, it is most likely that Penelope has remained faithful (11.444-46), so one might suppose that, by adopting a strategy of concealment, Odysseus suffers in forestalling his reunion with a faithful and beloved wife; but this supposition underestimates the mortal danger posed to Odysseus by the suitors, for they are prepared to murder Odysseus if he should turn up, even with no encouragement from Penelope -- a fact Odysseus correctly

perceives (2.246-51; 17.561-65). In view of this danger, Odysseus is better off keeping his identity a secret even if Penelope remains faithful. It follows that Odysseus' decision to conceal his identity, like that of the crewmen to slaughter the sacred cattle, is the dominant strategy.<sup>8</sup>

It is evident, then, that Odysseus' decision is logically identical to that of his shipmates. Nevertheless, while Odysseus is praised for his good judgment in making his choice, the crewmen are condemned for theirs. On

strictly rational grounds, however, it is evident that the crewmen's decision is as legitimate as that of Odysseus. What, then, is the basis of Homer's divergent judgments of rational choice? In what, exactly, does the crewmen's recklessness consist? If we return to the poem's opening, we shall discover that it is precisely the meaning of such recklessness that occupies Homer's attention immediately upon pronouncing his invocation.

**Table 2. Odysseus' Rational Choice**

| Strategies       | Circumstances:                |                               |
|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
|                  | Penelope faithful             | Penelope unfaithful           |
| Remain concealed | Maintains element of surprise | Maintains element of surprise |
| Reveal identity  | Loses element of surprise     | Betrayal and murder           |

**Reckless Commensuration and the Limits of Reason**

The *Odyssey* opens, as we have noticed, with an implicit comparison of Odysseus with his reckless crewmen and an invocation for divine assistance in expounding this contrast. In response to this invocation, the poem's scene shifts immediately to Olympus, the home of the gods. Presumably, Homer's Muse can best answer his prayer by beginning there. On Olympus we find Zeus about to speak, as he has been reflecting upon the life of Aigisthos, Klytemnestra's seducer and Agamemnon's murderer. In his discourse on Aigisthos, the first speech delivered in the *Odyssey*, Zeus reveals the meaning of recklessness. Beginning with the story of Aigisthos, we learn that rational choice is no safeguard but can even be the instrument of recklessness.

It is with Aigisthos in mind that Zeus formulates his renowned theodicy. Zeus holds that it is not the gods who are to blame if mortals suffer beyond their lot; on the

contrary, mortals have only themselves to blame or rather "their own recklessness" (*sphêisin atasthaliêisin*, 1.34; cf. 1.7).

Aigisthos is the object lesson in Zeus's instruction in the meaning of recklessness. Zeus observes that Aigisthos had been warned in advance of the vengeance of Orestes, Agamemnon's son, if he should seduce Klytemnestra and slay Agamemnon. Zeus emphasizes that Aigisthos *knew* (*eidôs*, 1.37) that he would pay the penalty for his deeds, yet he did them anyway. Evidently, the sheer intensity of Aigisthos' desire to supplant Agamemnon is sufficient to settle his choice to commit adultery and murder. Even the certain vengeance of Orestes does not outweigh his satisfaction in stealing Agamemnon's wife and throne.

We recoil in horror at hearing of Aigisthos' crimes. We have not, however, sufficiently understood the significance of this reaction of horror until we have come to terms with the fundamental rationality of the crime that incites it. Homer's judgment that such rational decisions are nevertheless

utterly reckless points the way. So we must explore further the character of Aigisthos' rational choice to break the laws proscribing adultery and regicide. In this connection it is helpful to note that Zeus's discussion of Aigisthos anticipates in some important ways the approach of recent studies of criminal behavior pioneered by the economist Gary Becker (1968). Like Zeus, Becker does not acknowledge any incompatibility between criminal behavior and rationality. Moreover, the notion underlying Becker's analysis, that a legal sanction essentially establishes a *price* for a given sort of misbehavior, isolates precisely the recklessness inherent in the *criminal's* conception of law as conceived in the *Odyssey*.<sup>9</sup>

On Homer's account, Aigisthos' rationalistic recklessness consists in his reckoning with Zeus's law as if it were merely a price tag. Aigisthos elects to murder Agamemnon and marry Klytemnestra because his desire to supplant Agamemnon is so great that even Orestes' divinely mandated vengeance is not sufficient to deter him. Presumably, Aigisthos knows better than anyone how much enjoyment sitting on the throne of Mycenae will bring him and what the vengeance of Orestes will cost. Thus, his calculation that the benefits of adultery and murder outweigh the costs is rational, to be sure. But his recklessness, in the poet's view, I suggest, consists in his treatment of Zeus's prohibition *in terms that even permit such commensuration*. Fundamental to this contention is an understanding that legal sanctions do not establish a price for the commission of proscribed behavior. They rather manifest, in this case, Zeus's unconditional condemnation of such conduct. A penalty for infractions exists to direct attention to this condemnation, not to invite deliberation as to its relative cost compared to that of unsatisfied and illicit desires (Berns 1979; Feinberg 1965). Ultimately, the respect that such laws properly command does not derive from any possible aggregation of carrots and sticks. It derives

rather from the sacred task that is the highest and essential function of law and punishment, namely education.

In view of the educational function of law -- where *education* is understood as the proper cultivation of the human soul -- it is evident that a proscriptive sanction is not adequately reckoned as a price. In its deepest signification a sanction testifies to the existence of the sacred. The sacred is, above all, that which commands respect on its own terms, not in virtue of comparison or analogy with something else. By its very nature, the sacred *defies* commensuration.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, the privileged status of the educational dimension of statecraft derives from the sanctity of the human soul, which it aims to improve. It is an insight into the sanctity of the soul, as we shall see, that proves to be Odysseus' major learning experience and the trigger of his change of heart; but for our immediate purposes, the sanctity of the soul is most readily illuminated by a familiar biblical passage: "What will it profit a man," Jesus asks, "if he should gain the whole world but forfeit his soul?" I take it that this question is a rhetorical one. The point is that *nothing* in the entire world can compensate one for, or make one indifferent toward, the loss of his soul. Thus no worldly thing can "take the measure" of man's soul. The soul, we may say, defies commensuration with worldly things.

Rationalism, however, upholds the limitless possibility of commensuration because it presumes the ultimate hegemony of reason in the pursuit of wisdom. If everything were commensurable, reason would indeed be sovereign in discernment. But Homer's *Odyssey* indicates that even a perfectly operating rational faculty, as in the cases of Aigisthos and of Odysseus' shipmates fails utterly at discerning what is necessary for wisdom, namely the fundamental difference between the sacred and the profane. Where reason accepts such a distinction, it does so on the authority of something higher than reason. Therefore, the consistent rationalist cannot accept (even

axiomatically) a sacred “value” as given. In propounding a universal hegemony for reason, the rationalist juggernaut inescapably collides with the sacred. The strategy of the rationalists thrust against this obstruction is simply to ignore those characteristics of the sacred that are not expressible in terms common with the principal objects of their interest. This is accomplished most easily in the case of the law by disregarding the educational significance of penalties and interpreting them simply as prices. As the rationalist sees it, laws do not educate, they merely regulate. Nothing is sacred, everything has its price.

Along with Aigisthos, Eurylochos and his mates are the unreconstructable rationalists in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Eurylochos’ speech to the crewmen shamelessly displays an utter indifference to the sanctity of Helios’ cattle. He treats the divine sanction proscribing Helios’ cattle as though it were simply a signal of the price charged by the gods for Thrinakian roast beef. With Eurylochos showing the way, the crewmen thus reckon the relative costs and benefits of their crime with faultless logic. As we have seen, they determine that it is best to slaughter the cattle because even in the worst case, they heartily prefer a quick death at sea to slow starvation. Because this reckoning is fundamentally heedless of the educational significance of punitive sanctions, I suggest, Homer condemns the men as “utterly reckless.”

Homer *condemns* the crewmen’s rational choice not because it is rational, then, but because it is *rationalistic*. The crewmen carelessly transgress the limits imposed by the sacred upon rational commensuration. We should carefully note that in condemning such rationalistic excess, Homer proves to be not a misologist but a friend to reason. To appreciate Homer’s stance, one must understand that rationalism is not an alien influence that infects reason with some foreign contagion. Rationalism is rather a form of licentiousness; it works its influence from within. Perhaps this can be clarified most effectively with the aid of a

political analogy. Rationalism is to reason as majority tyranny is to democracy. Friends of reason, like James Madison’s (*Federalist* No. 10) “friend of popular government,” must take care to guard especially against the vicious propensities that inhere in their favorites. Just as we learn from the framers of the U.S. Constitution that the flourishing of democracy depends upon institutions that *limit* the rule of majorities (Diamond 1959), so too we learn from Homer that the flourishing of reason into wisdom requires a recognition of *its* limits. This recognition is implicit in respect for the sacred, such as that which determines Odysseus’ refusal to join his crewmen in their rationalistic smorgasbord. It remains, of course, to consider how it is that Odysseus develops this life-enhancing reverence while his crewmen are condemned to a self-destructive rationalism.

### **The Etiology of Rationalism and the Roots of Reverence**

Careful consideration of Eurylochos’ speech on Thrinakia will reveal the underlying source of the crewmen’s rationalism. The key premise in Eurylochos’ argument, which facilitates the commensuration of death by starvation and death by divine punishment, is that “all deaths are hateful to wretched mortals” (*pantes men stygeroi thanatoi deiloisi brotoisi*, 12.341). This is a surprising contention. One supposes that death might sometimes appear to be a blessed release rather than something indiscriminately hateful, particularly to a “wretch.” But Eurylochos maintains that ill deaths are hateful. This is because, in his view, wretchedness is not the cause of man’s indiscriminate orientation toward death, but (as we shall see) *its effect*. Eurylochos’ contention, by itself, still appears to be a logical non sequitur, however. Why then is it so persuasive to his audience? The answer is that Eurylochos’ argument is an enthymeme, not simply a syllogism. In other words, its cogency depends upon a suppressed premise that his auditors supply on

their own. Only if we take it that human beings are haters of mortality in itself, does it follow that they will be *indiscriminate* haters of death. The influence of this premise in making possible Eurylochos' subsequent commensuration is decisive. For a hatred of death per se will obscure the qualitative differences among various ways one may come to die. Then all that remains is to reckon the length of life and how much pain and pleasure is felt during its span. Questions of "how long" and "how much" obviously admit a common measure; only commensurables are involved. Hence, as we have seen, Eurylochos' appeal to his shipmates rests simply on the superiority of a quick death to a slow death.

The obscurantist tendencies of the crewmen's hatred of mortality engender mistaken conviction of universal commensurability and, consequently, of the sovereignty of reason. The hatred of mortality as such conceals utterly the difference between the sacred and the profane, the noble and the base. It is this lack of discrimination that, in turn, truly accounts for the wretchedness Eurylochos attributes to mortals. The root meaning of Eurylochos' word for "wretched:" *deiloisi*, literally denotes "cowardice". The wretchedness of the coward consists, above all, in blindness to the qualitative difference between what is and what is not worth the risking of one's life. The hatred of mortality as the cause of cowardly wretchedness and its consequent lack of discrimination is indeed the great leveler. Once it has thus accomplished its work, the horizon of reason appears limitless. If we wish to account for the crewmen's rationalism, then, we must consider the genesis of their hatred of mortality. While Eurylochos and his mates evidently suppose that this hatred is simply in the nature of man, Homer suggests a somewhat different and certainly more complex view. As the poet shows, all men are not haters of mortality. Odysseus stands out as an exception.

Unlike his crewmen, Odysseus is not a hater of mortality. Nevertheless, neither is

he altogether dissimilar to his mates. Odysseus, too, has been guilty of recklessness as we have seen (cf. 18.139 wit 1.1-2; 10.437). Odysseus' recklessness derives from a source Homer recognizes as deep within the human soul, namely the *thymotic*, or "hearty," longing to accomplish great things, to win reputation and glory. Among the crewmen, a rather ordinary bunch unable to vent themselves heroically, this spirited passion has soured into a bitter and self-destructive hatred of mortality. It is not surprising that such men would blame and grow to hate their own mortality. For it is mortality that sets the ineluctable limits that finally prevent mediocrities from accomplishing great feats -- if only because time runs out. In Odysseus, by contrast, this hearty passion issues first of all in a typically heroic (one could say, 'Achillean') competitiveness. The path of heroic competitiveness has its own shortcomings, of course. By itself, such competitiveness knows no bounds. In its purest form, it is directed against the gods themselves, as the hero rivals the immortals in his own attainment of immortal glory. Thus, Odysseus recklessly ravages Troy's sacred citadel, the image of Olympus. He gloats, recklessly, over his defeat of Poseidon's son, Polyphemos the cyclops. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Odysseus from the likes of Achilles, Diomedes, and Ajax—to say nothing of his crewmen—is that he overcomes this reckless heroic competitiveness before it destroys him.

The poet underscores the importance of this development in a remarkable manner. Our first direct glimpse of Odysseus in the poem occurs as he is *refusing* the goddess Kalypso's offer of immortality (1.58—59, 5.206—24). In fact, we are told that Odysseus "longs to die" (*thanein himeiretai*, 1.59), so great is his desire to see hearth smoke leaping from his native Ithaka once again. From this point the narration of Odysseus' story retraces his steps by way of flashback in an effort, I suggest, to account for the remarkable choice he has made. Odysseus' reverent self-control on Thrinakia

is presented as the acid test of the change of heart that ultimately makes possible his refusal of Kalypso's offer. If we wish to learn what first triggered Odysseus' change of heart, his new appreciation of death and mortality, it is necessary above all to ponder the significance of his journey to the land of the dead. It is there that Odysseus encounters the shades of his comrades at Troy, the celebrated heroes Agamemnon and Achilles.

We have already considered the influence of Odysseus' interview with the shade of Agamemnon upon his decision to forego heroic self-aggrandizement and conceal his identity. But it is Achilles, more than anyone, who may be considered the expert witness on human *thymos* and the heroic longing for immortality. We expect that Odysseus' conversation with him will be particularly enlightening. Achilles appears just as Odysseus and Agamemnon are concluding their tearful exchange of tales, Agamemnon of his betrayal and murder at the hands of Aigisthos and Klytemnestra, and Odysseus of his harrowing experiences at sea (11.465-67). Achilles, who is weeping himself, approaches and asks how Odysseus dares while still living to come to Hades. In response, Odysseus recounts to Achilles the purpose of his mission and bemoans the evils that seem perpetually to obstruct his homecoming. Then he addresses himself to Achilles' condition. Though deeply moved by Agamemnon's suffering, Odysseus finds it most surprising that the illustrious Achilles should have any reason to lament. Odysseus contrasts his own sufferings with what he maintains is Achilles' unprecedented blessedness. What is death, wonders Odysseus, compared to the glory of Achilles? Achilles, Odysseus declares, is the happiest (*makartatos*, 11.483) man of all time—in life he was honored “as an equal to the gods,” and now he rules magnificently over all the dead. In response, Achilles crisply orders Odysseus not to make light of death. In one of the most famous passages in the *Odyssey*, Achilles bitterly proclaims his preference for mortal life—even the least

glorious life imaginable as the slave of a nobody—over being the illustrious monarch of the underworld (11.489—91). To rule the underworld is the station of a god, yet Achilles suggests that Odysseus is badly mistaken in supposing that the exchange of mortal life is a good trade for such an apotheosis. The greatest Achaian hero, who vied with the gods in his wrath and in his longing for glory, evidently regrets his success. It would be an understatement to say that the effect of this speech on Odysseus is considerable.

We will entirely miss the significance of this speech for Odysseus, however, if we merely look to the most famous commentary upon it for its interpretation. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates does not approach the interpretation of Achilles' speech from Odysseus' perspective but from the standpoint of young, impressionable cadets. To be sure, Achilles' speech could sap the courage of callow youth (Plato 1972, 386a6-c7; cf. 378d5-e1). Someone young in character and understanding might hastily infer, on the basis of Achilles' preference for slavery to death, that no cause warrants the risk of one's life. But surely it would be a great error to mistake Odysseus for a callow youth. His reception of Achilles' speech is different. If we attempt to interpret Achilles' speech as Odysseus understands it, we must begin by squaring it with what Odysseus knows of Achilles' character. Above all, Achilles is unreproachably courageous. So Odysseus, who fought beside Achilles for 10 years at Troy, would know better than to interpret his speech as the counsel of a coward. Next, we must keep in mind that Achilles intends his speech as a rejoinder to Odysseus' unwarranted congratulations on his supposed blessedness. Odysseus makes light of death because he supposes Achilles' godlike immortality is worth more than mortal life. Achilles obviously disagrees. But if Achilles' preference for even the meanest mortal life over his godlike station in Hades is unintelligible as the counsel of a coward, how can it be understood? The key to answering this question, it seems to me, is

the recognition that Achilles' preference reflects the *sanctity* of mortal life, its fundamental incommensurability with even a godlike immortality. One can reconcile Achilles' speech and deeds only by recognizing that life is sacred and thus that his preference of the mortal over the immortal is lexicographic.<sup>11</sup>

Odysseus finds a great truth in Achilles' bitterness. Achilles represents better than anyone man's heroic longing to *be* someone. Immortality seems the way to be because being would appear to entail permanence. This is certainly the case with the gods, whose being is distinguished above all by their immortality. For mortal man, though, there is a difference. A mortal's being consists in what Homer calls *psychê*, which means both life and soul. We have no assurance, however, that *psychê*, even as soul, is immortal; nor is even the possession of *psychê* to be taken for granted. In the Homeric perspective, man must "win his soul" (*arnymenos hên te psychên*, 1.5). Only then will he come into his own. For a human being, striving for immortality is simply beside the point (cf. Matthew 16:25). Profiting From Achilles' experience, Odysseus learns that mortal men become godlike at the cost of their own souls. Achilles' shade is not a true soul but merely a "witless and exhausted phantom" (11.473-76; 10.492-95). In his attempt to rival the gods, Achilles lost the most divine thing in himself. This is the paradoxical truth beneath Achilles' bitter and easily misconstrued denunciation of his position in Hades. Of course it is too late for Achilles to benefit from this lesson, but it is not too late for Odysseus.

Beginning with his refusal to participate in his crewmen's slaughter of Helios' sacred cattle, Odysseus resists on his own repeated temptations to treat mortals and immortals as commensurable. He consistently rebuts any comparisons between himself and the gods (e.g., 5.208-24, 7.208-21, 16.186-91). In his choice of women, Odysseus prefers Penelope to the goddess Kalypso -- despite the fact that on any common dimension of

comparison Kalypso is superior (5.211-18). He rejects Kalypso's offer of immortality without a second thought. Where, earlier, Odysseus had been inclined to praise and even to envy Achilles for being esteemed equal to the gods, he now draws a strict line in his own ambitions. He will vie only with mortals (8.221-25). Rivalry with the gods, Odysseus comes to understand, is merely reckless commensuration in heroic guise. Death, the most tangible dividing line between mortals and immortals, becomes something for which Odysseus urges respect. He refuses to glory over the dead bodies of even his most hated enemies, the reckless suitors of Penelope; he declares that to do so would be "unholy" (22.410-13). Where his crewmen's hatred of mortality issues in the rationalistic violation of the sacred cattle, Odysseus' appreciation of mortal life disposes him to respect *especially* the cattle of Helios. For it is, Helios, the sun god, who is sovereign over the days and seasons that measure the limits of our mortality (Flaumenhaft 1982). Genuine reverence to the sun god is to be found in a respectful appreciation of these limits rather than in the belief in universal enlightenment.

Homer does not permit Odysseus to resume the throne of Ithaka without a final recognition of his newly developed reverence, so important it is to his claim to heroic status. The political consummation of Odysseus' return to Ithaka, a settlement between his house and the families of the suitors whom he has killed, depends upon his respecting certain limits to the satisfaction of vengeance and the execution of justice. In the poem's final battle, which is incited by the suitors' angry relations, Odysseus soon wins the upper hand. If Odysseus were to press his advantage to the point of decimating the suitors' relatives, however, a peaceful settlement would become untenable. A protracted and bloody vendetta would result instead. All the same, justice would seem to authorize the punishment of those who have attempted to murder Odysseus and who for three years stood by without a word as their own sons

and brothers recklessly abused his household. But at precisely the point when Odysseus' advantage is clear, Athena intervenes. Athena commands Odysseus in the name of Zeus to yield. Homer notes that Odysseus obeyed but did not merely obey—he rejoiced in his heart (*epieitheto, chaire de thymôî*, 24.545). With this statement Homer indicates that Odysseus' change of heart is complete. For his rejoicing in Zeus's command is not a merely ritual piety before a more powerful god. Odysseus' joy reveals that his heart, his *thymos* is in full accord with the delimitation of commensuration, even in the difficult case when such commensuration is in the service of distributive justice. Justice, as should already be evident, is not the highest virtue in the *Odyssey*. On the contrary, it is thanks to his reverence that the fierce spirit of Odysseus in the end fully internalizes this gentle lesson in moderation. It is by means of his comprehensive change of heart that Odysseus comes into his own, at last winning his soul. This achievement, which even Achilles cannot match, establishes the heroic superiority of Odysseus. With this the *Odyssey* comes to a close.

### Conclusion

We began by noting that the study of Homer has fallen into a state of neglect and even disrepute among modern students of politics and by suggesting that perhaps, upon consideration, the *Odyssey* might be found to be both relevant and beneficent in view of the special needs of our own polity. This consideration focused on Odysseus' adventure on the island of Thrinakia, where he distinguishes himself most decisively from his recklessly rationalistic shipmates. At first glance, the basis of this distinction appeared untenable. Homer condemns the crewmen for their recklessness in electing a strategy that is logically identical to a subsequent strategy of Odysseus that earns him praise for his good Judgment. We resisted the temptation to attribute this discrepancy to a host of external factors and

attempted instead to look further within the poem to discover the basis upon which the poet would dare to condemn the crewmen's undoubtedly rational choice. Finally, we sustained Homer's charge of recklessness and attributed it to the crewmen's heedlessness of the limits of rational commensuration. These limits are dictated by the sacred, which warrants respect in itself, not by virtue of analogy or comparison with anything else. In accordance with their rationalistic presumption of the boundless powers of reason, however, the crewmen treat the divine sanction of Helios' cattle as if it were a mere price tag.

Odysseus, by contrast, does not violate the sacred cattle. His intelligence (like Achilles' courage) is beyond reproach; but Homer's elevation of Odysseus to heroic status does not simply rest upon that intelligence. Odysseus' heroic excellence, which truly sets him above the other Achaian kings, consists in his combination of godliness and resourceful intelligence. Odysseus comes to accept this reverential constraint on his intelligence as he learns that human beings, however they may long for immortality, cannot rival the gods. Such a competition is out of the question because man simply cannot "take the measure" of the gods. As Odysseus learns from Achilles, mortal man becomes more godlike at the cost of his own soul -- the most divine thing in him. From this paradoxical insight into the fundamental incommensurability of men and gods, Odysseus gains an appreciation of the excellence that is specific to human beings. Odysseus' appreciation of human mortality contrasts most sharply with the hatred of mortality of his cowardly shipmates. While their hatred of mortality urges them on to recklessness, Odysseus' appreciation of human mortality accompanies a sobering

divination of the limits that properly constrain human reason. By virtue of this change of heart, Odysseus *breaks with* the customary behavior of the "typical hero." Odysseus' reverence, therefore, should not be confused with a merely blind observance of custom in whatever guise that custom may present itself. On the contrary, Odysseus' reverence is above all inclined to political moderation, as the conclusion of the poem indicates.

Homer's criticism of rationalism could be studied with profit at any time. But perhaps nowhere does this lesson have greater *political* importance than in a modern commercial republic like our own. Harbored within this ordinarily mild polity is a dangerous propensity that threatens to undermine the very liberty that is its hallmark and precious heritage. Commercialism, taken to excess, holds nothing sacred, not even the moral and political principles that make free trade, to say nothing of our other freedoms, possible. To the unbridled commercialist, everything has its price. This rationalistic propensity of the commercial republic provides its adversaries across the range of the political spectrum with "fruitful topics" for their "specious declamations." Solzhenitsyn joins Lenin, if in little else, in scorn for capitalists who one day will sell the rope their enemies will use to hang them. In this regard, it is most fitting and highly satisfying that Odysseus, whom some have disparaged as "the acquisitive hero," provides a choice lesson for friends of the commercial republic.

The unbounded pursuit of commercial maximization is, after all, nothing if not a variety of rationalism. Like Odysseus' crewmen, Lenin's hypothetical capitalist reduces fundamental constitutional or legal principles to mere price tags. But the substance of such fundamental laws and rights is formulated with a view to the human soul and its proper cultivation: to disregard their sanctity is an error Homer

reveals as the height of recklessness. In light of Homer's *Odyssey*, we see more clearly the significance of Strauss's arguments on the need to remain open to the claims of revelation and Hayek's arguments against rule utilitarianism and the presuppositions of "Posnerian judges." We also gain a deeper appreciation for the wisdom of our founders. Natural rights, they proclaimed, are "unalienable" and "self-evident" -- which is to say that their authority is not dependent upon rational demonstration and that they are not to be rearranged merely to promote "social wealth." The "genius of American politics" lies not in a dedication to rationally demonstrable first principles but rather in a solemn respect for the "givenness" of common-law liberties and the equal rights with which we are endowed by our creator (see Boorstin 1953, chap. 1). In maintaining the "self-evidence" of natural rights, the founders disagreed decisively with Thomas Hobbes, himself an expounder of a doctrine of natural rights. Hobbes, however, does not settle for the self-evidence of natural rights. Instead, he presents an impressively rationalistic derivation of these rights. We must not fail to note, however, that this derivation culminates in the institution of an authoritarian state, the Leviathan. Absolutism, the antithesis of liberty, would seem to be the consequence of rationalism in politics. Friends of the commercial republic might rightly conclude, then, that it is not the emulous zeal of impressionable readers of Homer that most endangers their favored political order. A much more pressing threat is posed by the irreverent conviction of the hegemony of reason, to which commercialism itself inclines us. If, in opposition to this inclination, we recommend that such moderate and moderating first principles as those to which our nation is dedicated be respected as sacred, we are following a trail blazed by our own founding fathers, but charted originally, I suggest, by the poet of the *Odyssey*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Is reason, as we understand it, sufficiently recognizable in the understanding of the ancients to accommodate the intelligibility of a claim designating Homer as a critic of rationalism? This is a complex issue, but one that can perhaps be addressed sufficiently for present purposes. The semantic range of reason (*logos*) among the ancients is best indicated by the denotation of the word itself. In Greek *logos* literally means a reckoning or giving of accounts, principally by ratio or analogy. At the heart of this complex of meanings is the notion of commensuration. Thus an “irrational” number – the usage has survived intact from the earliest days of ancient mathematics – is so termed precisely because of its incommensurability. One is not able to give an account of such a number in terms of other numbers, that is, as a ratio. Whatever their other differences, ancients and moderns alike acknowledge commensuration as the characteristic *modus operandi* of reason. It is against the limitless hegemony of reason thus conceived that I understand Homer’s attack in the *Odyssey* to be directed.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks largely to Austin’s (1975) contribution, it is again admissible in academic circles to speak of Homer’s intention. Let us grant to the ‘analytic’ and ‘oralist’ schools of Homeric interpretation that the manuscript tradition is imperfect and that the most ancient bards performed without benefit of a written text. But let us also note that those who object to the presumption of compositional integrity in the *Odyssey* typically rest their case on the dubious assumption that textual discrepancy necessarily implies a lack of design. As I endeavor to show in this essay, such discrepancies may well play an essential role in the poet’s presentation of even his most important teachings.

<sup>3</sup> David Davies’s (1985) perceptive account of the remarkable delicacy of judgment displayed by Odysseus in wresting and then returning Agamemnon’s scepter (*Iliad* 2) leaves no doubt as to the poet’s respect for the excellence of Odysseus’ mind in the *Iliad*. Stanford (1985, 74-76) holds that all of Odysseus’ “untypical” excellences, except one, are manifest in both poems. He maintains that only the intellectual curiosity of Odysseus appears uniquely in the *Odyssey*. In my view, however, Odysseus’ desire to see peoples and places along his route back to

Ithaca does not issue so much from a novel love of learning as from his accustomed swashbuckling adventurism. It is significant that once he is cured of these swashbuckling tendencies, Odysseus is interested in seeing one sight alone—hearth smoke rising from his native Ithaca (1.58-59). This *new* concern for hearth and home is evidence of the dawn of reverence in Odysseus.

<sup>4</sup> Careful attention to the epithets used of Odysseus will uncover an interesting pattern that further substantiates this change. Prior to the present time of the narration of the *Odyssey*, particularly during the extended flashback of books 9 through 12, Odysseus’ most common epithets consistently refer to his intelligence (*polymêtis*, *polymêchan*; see Dunbar’s *Concordance to the Odyssey*). But from the time of the poem’s narration, which commences with Odysseus’ refusal of Kalypso’s offer of immortality, no epithet is used of Odysseus more frequently than *dios*, or godly. Odysseus, as we shall see, is adamant from this time on in his opposition to any suggestion or comparison or rivalry with the gods. It follows that those translators who render *dios* as “godlike” -- implying a blurring of the distinction between Odysseus and the immortals -- have it exactly wrong. Like our word godly, *dios* evidently has another significance besides godlike. A godly man is one “devoutly observant of the laws of god” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 4.273).

<sup>5</sup> My translations in this essay are based on W.B. Stanford’s edition of the *Odyssey* (Macmillan & Co., London, 1965). Citations are keyed to book and line number.

<sup>6</sup> It is worthwhile to consult Jon Ulster’s (1979) analysis of Odysseus’ “strategy of precommitment” in dealing with the Sirens’ temptation. I would supplement Ulster’s account with the observation that Odysseus’ strategy is exercised against a desire for universal knowledge, which the Sirens expressly promise to satisfy (12.184-91; also cf. 12.49 with 12.160). In this sense, Odysseus’ strategy can be understood as a preliminary means for resisting the Siren song of rationalism. The moderation ultimately necessary in such a case, however, would involve not merely an external control of the appetites but a change of heart that itself recognizes the peculiar limits of a human wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> Except, perhaps, in the rare case when this decision rule appears to conflict with the maximization of expected utility, as contrived in Newcomb's Problem. The clearest statement of the controversy surrounding this problem, its political relevance, and its resolution -- by recasting its gaming elements into independent decisions -- is presented by Steven Brams (1976, 194-203). In the present case, we may easily point to evidence of such independence (see, e.g., 12.382-87). But it is also clear that the two decision rules converge here anyway because the men's preferences across the alternatives are quite intense. Satisfying one's hunger with impunity is much preferred to starvation, as goes without saying. But even the preference for a quick death to a slow death is described by Eurylochos as "heartly" (*apo thymon*, 12.350).

<sup>8</sup> One might, in an expanded matrix, consider Odysseus' options to reveal his identity to particular individuals. The dynamics driving his decision toward concealment would be the same, however, even in the difficult case of Penelope herself. Granting that Penelope is faithful, Odysseus still fears that in her joy at discovering he is home she will alarm the suitors and inadvertently cause his destruction (13.192-93, 16.301-3, 19.476-86). Of course, Odysseus eventually does make himself known to Telemachos and to Eumaios and Philoitios. In each of these cases, Odysseus chooses to dissemble until he is satisfied that the consequences of revelation, whatever Penelope's faithfulness, will not lose him the element of surprise (see, e.g., 16.151-68, 454-49; 21.192-229).

<sup>9</sup> Because the economist's interest in formulating a "production function" for crime compels him to adopt the perspective of the criminal, it is only fair to note that this is not necessarily Becker's own understanding of sanctions. Still, it is significant that it is the poet, not the economist, who can go on to reveal the rationalism implicit in such a conception as itself a root cause of criminal recklessness.

<sup>10</sup> The defiance of commensuration essential to the sacred is further substantiated by the comic consequences of calling it into question. Henny Youngman tells the story of a salesman whose customer innocently asks "How's your wife?" "Compared to what is the salesman's snappy response. The razor's edge of Youngman's joke

results from his opposite and precisely balanced strokes of rationalism and reverence, the former evident in the salesman's proverbially exclusive orientation to "bottom-line" comparisons, the latter manifest in our expectations concerning the sanctity of marriage. Spouses, after all, are loved in themselves—not merely by comparison with others.

<sup>11</sup> A lexicographic order ranks alternatives according to a primary criterion without regard to their rank on a secondary criterion. In the case of a tie, the tied alternatives are ranked according to a second criterion without regard to their rank on a third, and so on—the way words are ordered in a dictionary. Achilles' preference like all lexicographic orderings, does not violate transitivity. Lexicographic preferences are rational in this purely ordinal sense, though they preclude rational comparisons in the more meaningful sense of reason as commensuration. Riker and Ordeshook (1973, 43), who observe that the *fundamental* aims of politics typically resist commensuration, are instructive in this regard. These authors, to their credit, accept the existence of such incommensurability, which they represent with lexicographic preferences, as defining limits to their rational-choice theory of politics. See also the excellent discussion of Elster (1979, 125), who rightly notes that the lexicographic character of such incommensurables is best understood as constituting "constraints on decision-making rather than as criteria for decision-making."

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