

Odyssey of Freedom

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What is the nature of freedom? At least two possibilities present themselves. One is to view freedom as the absence of constraint, and total freedom as the complete absence of constraint. On this account, the only way to be free is to cast off all external shackles and impediments, so that we have nothing by which to guide our choices but our own free will. Of course, there is a problem with this point of view. For even if we so free ourselves from all external influence that we are left with nothing by which to guide our choices but our own naked will, we are nonetheless limited by our will. Free of even every external constraint, we are still bound by our internal limitations. The most important of these is our own imagination. Even completely free of every external constraint, we can choose nothing beyond what we are capable of imagining.

Another way to think of freedom is in terms of what we are free for. Even if no one else is telling us what to do, we must still do something. From this point of view, our mission is to determine the best possible exercise of the prerogative of liberty. Faced with a choice between two, ten, a hundred, or a thousand different possible courses of action, how can we determine which is best, or at least which ones are more fitting than others? Again, we are forced to repair to our own imaginations. What would life look like lived out along each of these different possible paths? Which of them seem attractive only in the short term, which offer better prospects for the long term, and which will ultimately be most conducive to a rich and complete life?

In short, our capacity to make the most of our freedom pivots on our imagination. If we can only imagine vain, superficial, and self-defeating sorts of lives, then we are destined to lead vain, superficial, and self-defeating lives. To make the most of our freedom by leading the best lives of which we are

capable, we need to nourish and exercise our imaginations. What we are capable of discovering is limited by what we are capable of looking for, and we can only search for what we are capable of conceiving. So long as we remain at home in the familiar – never questioning, never encountering new points of view, reclining in the easy chair of life – our imaginations will remain soft and flabby. We will become prisoners of our own imaginative indolence. To become our best, we need to venture forth, to challenge our imaginations, to look at life anew.

Where in the 21st century can human beings turn for such imaginative provocation? It is not inconceivable that the answer may lie partly in the fruits of new science and new technology. For example, might the internet open up new vistas to the imagination that would have once remained closed? Or might new developments in psychopharmacology, the science of brain chemistry, enable us to see life from novel perspectives? In both of these cases and many more, it is possible that the future of the imagination lies in a kind of virtual reality, where characters can be built by taking not what the Germans call a *Bildungsreise*, an educational journey, but a trip of a new and very different sort. For my own part, however, I worry that these new technologies, far from heightening and sharpening our imaginations, may in fact be numbing and dumbing them down.

When it comes to addressing the perennial questions about the possible forms human life can take and the practical implications of each, it is likely that, should we decide to forsake the old for the new, we would be selling ourselves short. What is the biggest problem with new books? Quite simply, that they distract us from the old books. And when it comes to the enrichment of the human imagination, some of the very oldest books remain the very best. For present purposes, I have in mind specifically one of the oldest books in western civilization, which also happens to be one of the greatest ever composed. In fact, it is perhaps the oldest and greatest epic we have in the western tradition, which also happens to be one of the most challenging and beautiful explorations of the possibilities for human life ever composed: Homer's *Odyssey*.

Contemporary scholars have questioned whether the two great epics attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are, as tradition would have it, the product of a single blind bard. As a matter of fact, they have also questioned whether a person called Homer ever existed. For one thing, we lack any reliable biographical information from antiquity. Moreover, the poems themselves exhibit traits, such as stereotypical formulae, that suggest they may represent the culmination of many centuries of oral story telling that may or may not have been committed to writing by a single artist. Herodotus, the “father of history” who should really be known as the father of anthropology, suggests they date from the mid-9th century BC, and this hypothesis seems as good as any other. On the Homer question, we may leave ourselves to our own imaginations without in any way compromising the *Odyssey*’s imaginative riches.

What is really most vital about the *Odyssey* is not so much when it was committed to writing or by what hand, but what it has to say, something some of us may have missed if we encountered it only in the first bloom of youth. For it is not only a great story whose tales of gods and goddesses, magical isles, alluring nymphs, one-eyed, man-eating giants, and the incredible exploits of its hero, Odysseus, have enchanted children for millennia. It is also one of the most intriguing and beautiful, and I would add, illuminating, explorations of human life ever composed. If you want to know what different possibilities are open to us in life and what the choices between those various alternatives entail, we could find few texts in the entire library of human civilization that compare to the *Odyssey*.

Given the time constraints under which we operate, we cannot possibly hope to plumb the depths of the *Odyssey* in its entirety. In fact, we can barely scratch its surface. But in hopes of opening a window that will allow some of its brilliant light to shine forth, I propose to focus our attention on several of the most challenging of Odysseus’ encounters, in the order in which they are revealed in the narrative. In particular, we will focus on Odysseus’ seven-year sojourn with the beautiful nymph Calypso, his brief visit to the land of the Lotus-Eaters, and finally, his deadly encounter with the Cyclops. The

intent in touching on each of these tales is not to exhaust their significances, but to see each as an opportunity to begin to trace out a way of reading Homer that sheds light on our own odysseys of freedom.

As you recall, the *Odyssey* tells the tale of Odysseus, the man of many ways, the Greek hero who devised the stratagem of the Trojan horse to mislead and defeat the Trojans in the Greek's 10-year siege of Troy. The war over, Odysseus and his men set sail for their home, Ithaca, not knowing that another 10 years will be required before any of them reaches its shores. During Odysseus' 20-year absence, the unruly young men of Troy have become suitors to Odysseus' wife Penelope, attempting to force her to admit that her husband is dead and to choose from among their number one as his successor. In short, the suitors are seeking to assume both Odysseus' bed and throne. During this time, his infant son Telemachus has grown into a young man, faced with the difficult task of both upholding his long-absent father's honor and finding his own way in the world.

The epic begins with an invocation. "Tell me, muse, of Odysseus, the man of many ways," who sacked Troy's citadel and suffered many years upon the sea, "struggling for his own soul and the homecoming of his companions." These epithets are not insignificant. First, Odysseus is a "man of many ways." This phrase is often translated "wily" or even "clever," but these renderings represent both an oversimplification and a misinterpretation. Odysseus is not merely clever, someone who always manages to figure out a way to get what he wants. He is also and more essentially an explorer, following many paths, trying out different ways of life in order to gain a better understanding of the human situation. In *Odysseus* we find the consummate reminder that to really know and appreciate where we are, we need to understand the other places we could be.

Also, we are told that Odysseus is struggling for his own soul. This phrase is often translated as struggling for his own life, with the implication that Odysseus' primary concern is to save his own life and that of his men – another misinterpretation. In fact, if his goal were merely to preserve his life, this

seafarer's best course of action would be simply to drop anchor, so to speak, and remain where he is. If this were so, then, for reasons we will soon see, Odysseus could hope for no better home than in the arms of Calypso, an alternative he roundly rejects. What Odysseus is really struggling for is not his life but his soul, the target that lies at the dynamic intersection between every human being's nature and destiny. Odysseus knows that life is not a given but an achievement, and he appreciates the importance of struggling for it.

Let us turn to the first of our three of Odysseus' encounters. When first we meet Odysseus – not in Book I but in Book V of the epic – he is alone on the beach of Calypso's island, where he has been resident for seven years. Instead of savoring its delights, he is staring out across the sea, "breaking his heart in tears, lamentation, and sorrow." To appreciate the incredibility of Odysseus' frame of mind, we must first understand something of Calypso and her island. To begin with, the island is such an extraordinarily beautiful spot that "even a god who came into that place would have admired what he saw, the heart delighting within him." It is full of delights of every kind, and it would seem that Odysseus has been amazingly fortunate to spend the last seven years of his life in the greatest pleasure garden a human being could imagine.

Moreover, Calypso herself is beyond all mortals in beauty, and he is able to lie with her every night in the hollow caverns of her magical abode. In other words, Odysseus has the opportunity to make love every night with a woman, not only a willing woman but a woman who wants him, a woman who is not only more beautiful than any woman in the world but one whose beauty partakes of the otherworldly and the divine. Her face and build are beyond any that will ever grace the cover of a fashion magazine. She is also, as a goddess, both ageless and immortal, so her sensual allure will never fade. In short, Odysseus finds himself in a dream-like circumstance that even young men of 18 scarcely dare dream of, where his every sensual fantasy is gratified the very moment he conceives of it. So why is Odysseus weeping and pining for home?

The mystery is further heightened by the fact that Calypso has offered Odysseus what might seem the greatest inducement of all, if only he will agree to stay with her. What is this reward? Why, it is the very prize that the warriors on the plains of Troy gave their lives for: immortality. Yet what is promised Odysseus here is not the mere vicarious immortality of fame – the hope that your name will be on the lips of your descendants, like the fame of matchless Achilles – but genuine immortality, a deathless life. If Odysseus will but agree, the goddess will “make him immortal and all his days endless.” How could he, a mere mortal whose days are numbered, possibly forsake this Eden for a long and dangerous voyage homeward, only to spend his remaining days with an aging wife who is Calypso’s inferior in beauty?

The answer, of course, is that mere deathlessness is not life at its fullest, mere beauty is not love at its deepest, and mere safety and comfort are not what human beings are for. A ship may be safest in harbor, but that is not what ships are for. In life with Calypso, Odysseus has no reason for being, save to enjoy himself. The man of many ways has no way left, if by way we mean a way to challenge and develop himself and make an enduring contribution to the lives of others. Instead, he foresees nothing more than a life of unending effortlessness, merely persisting in a kind of vegetative state with nothing to struggle for. Each day offers no challenge save for the challenge of getting through the day without one. Because there is nothing to struggle for, there is nothing to care for, and he will spend his days in a living death, a stagnant and ultimately sterile life with no way out.

Odysseus has learned that following our baser appetites to their logical conclusion would lead us to an existence that is vacuous and ultimately unfulfilling. It is not in idleness that we best express our capacity for freedom. It is in activity, in facing challenges, that we create our fullest lives. Odysseus cannot be himself apart from those he loves, above all his wife and son. To be sure, he could become someone else, a god, with nothing to do but amuse himself, but he has tasted and found insipid the frivolous inhumanity of this path. Instead, he longs to recover and renew his humanity by returning home

to those whose relationships define him and give his life meaning. In his essence, Odysseus is not the immortal plaything of a goddess but the mortal husband to Penelope, father of Telemachus, son of Laertes, and ruler of Ithaca.

The second of Odysseus' encounters, which at first appears to constitute but a brief interlude in the narrative, concerns his encounter with the Lotus-Eaters. Journeying home from Troy, Odysseus and his men have been swept along on the hostile sea for nine days straight when they finally land on the Lotus-Eaters' shore. After they have eaten, Odysseus sends some of his men ahead to find out "what men, eaters of bread, might live here in this country." When the men come upon the Lotus-Eaters, instead of hostiles they find a peaceable people, who instead of girding themselves for battle only give them Lotus to taste of. For Odysseus' battle-tested, battle-weary, and battle-hardened men, whose first stop on the way home from Troy led to the sacking of a city and the killing of its people, the lotus represented a dramatic change of pace.

All is not bliss, however, at least not from Odysseus' point of view, because tasting of the Lotus has a remarkable effect on his men. Any who ate of the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus was "unwilling to take any message back, or to go away, but wanted to stay there with the lotus-eating people, feeding on lotus, and forget the way home." In other words, they found contentment. What, we may ask, is so bad about contentment? After all, Odysseus' men surely know that the sea voyage home will be difficult and treacherous. Moreover, they are probably troubled by uncertainties about what awaits them, should they, after 20 long years, finally reach home. Odysseus is warned again and again throughout the narrative of the bloody fate that awaited Agamemnon when he returned from Troy; namely, murder at the hands of his adulterous wife.

Why shouldn't Odysseus' exhausted men simply remain in the land of the Lotus-Eaters, eating the honey-sweet fruit of the lotus, and forgetting the way home? Why does Odysseus feel that he must come and capture them, hauling them back to the ships by force? Why not allow them to make their

own choice, just as some of the crew of the HMS Bounty chose to remain in Tahiti? Part of the answer may lie in the breakdown of discipline implied by the Bounty, site of a famous mutiny. But peering deeper, we note that the Lotus-Eaters are not bread eaters. They lead the primitive lives of hunter-gatherers, merely picking fruit, and not planting, tending, harvesting, grinding, or baking their own bread. The Lotus-Eaters, in other words, have no work, and merely pass their days in idle sedation, living off what lies ready to hand. To Odysseus, this appears an uncivilized existence, a life fit only for beasts really, requiring no creativity and no dedication.

The Lotus-Eaters have no cares, no concerns, no aspirations. So long as the lotus lies at their fingertips, they are at home wherever they happen to be, which is the same as saying that they are homeless. Odysseus, by contrast, is a man on a mission, a voyage of discovery that he hopes will eventually lead him back to his one real home. If our sole objective in life is to avoid pain and suffering and pass our days in a state of mere contentment, then the lotus has something to offer. If, on the other hand, we aim not only to win our souls and our lives – not merely to pass our days but to seize every single one of them and wring from it the most life possible – then the Lotus-Eaters and their fruit represent one of life’s most dangerous temptations. Theirs, too, is a kind of vegetative existence, where the human search is suspended, and time and place and identity all blend together.

Can we find happiness in a bottle, a syringe, or a neurochemistry laboratory? If the answer is yes, and all we need do to satisfy our deepest longings is merely to discover or invent the right drug, then the Lotus-Eaters show us the way. If human happiness and fulfillment are merely the right balance of neurotransmitters at the right synapses in the right nuclei of the brain, then there is no more promising course than to redouble our efforts to develop a superior version of cocaine or heroin that does not shorten our lives or undermine our health. But what if human flourishing is not a merely chemical phenomenon, and what if what we stand for is not superseded by our mood or level of anxiety? What if

happiness itself is not a mood at all, but something radically different – not a passive state of contentment but an active state of flourishing? In that case, we founder when we cavort with the lotus.

The third of Odysseus' encounters, immediately following his departure from the land of the Lotus-Eaters, takes place in the land of the lawless Cyclopes. The Cyclopes are remarkable for several reasons. They put all their trust in the gods, neither plowing nor planting anything, and knowing no cultivation. Moreover, they have neither meetings nor counsels. In addition, they do not construct habitations for themselves, but merely live in caverns. Each one of the Cyclopes is a law unto himself for his own wives and children, and none of them cares anything about the others. The Cyclopes, in other words, live in what later philosophers called a "state of nature," a condition prior to the development of communities and laws.

Though the Cyclopes are children of Poseidon, the god of the sea, they have neither shipwrights nor ships among them. They do not venture onto the sea, which, in the sea-faring culture of the ancient Mediterranean, where sea trade is the means to prosperity, means that they have no commerce. They never travel to other lands or visit other peoples. What does this imply? It implies that they do not know what it is like to be strangers in a strange place, nor have they any interest in hospitality or serving as good hosts. Moreover, they are one-eyed creatures, with the limitations that come from monocular vision. They have no stereoscopic vision, and thus lack both depth perception and the ability to see things from more than one perspective. They are, in other words, unimaginative egoists, concerned only with themselves, and able to see things from only one point of view.

Odysseus tells his men that he and a few companions will venture out to find out about these people, whether "they are violent and savage and without justice," or "hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly." Coming upon the cave of one of the Cyclopes, Odysseus and his men enter and help themselves to the cheeses, milk, and other good things they find there. Recognizing the peril of their situation, Odysseus' men argue that they should take what they can and leave immediately, but

Odysseus insists on staying put. He wants to see their host. When they meet the giant Polyphemus, Odysseus offers words of greeting and reminds the Cyclops to be mindful of Zeus, patron of hospitality, and treat him and his men kindly. Yet to their horror, the Cyclops responds that he and his kind do not concern themselves with the gods, since the Cyclopes are far better than they.

Instead of extending hospitality and asking Odysseus and his men to join him for supper, the lawless Cyclops proceeds to kill two of Odysseus' men and eat them for supper, "slapping them, like killing puppies, against the ground, their brains running all over the floor." Then, cutting them up limb by limb, he gulps them down, "entrails, flesh, and the marrowy bones alike." The Cyclops is not interested in the identity of Odysseus and his men or in the stories they might tell. Nor is he interested in telling them his own story. Instead, he sees Odysseus and his men as mere meat. The Cyclops is inhuman, and his inhumanity consists precisely in the fact that he is half-blind, and therefore unable to recognize the humanity of others. In other human beings he sees only flesh with which he can sate his appetite. He is incurious, uncaring, and operates from only the basest utilitarian motives.

The Cyclops is, in other words, the very antithesis of Odysseus, who is nourished less by others' cheeses and milk than by the stories they tell and their appreciation for his stories. We have been told that the world is made up of atoms and molecules. We have been told that human beings are made up of carbohydrates, fats and proteins, or muscle, nerves, and blood. In fact, however, the world is not made up primarily of atoms, and human beings are not made up primarily of flesh. Instead, human life is constituted less of flesh than of stories. It is in the stories we tell one another that we offer a vision of human life – what it is, what it could be, and what we would need to do to transform the former into the latter. We are, more than anything else, our stories. That ever-observant Odysseus both effects his escape and exacts his revenge by first tricking the Cyclops with a false story and then blinding him is the highest form of poetic justice.

How then shall we end this brief excursion into Homer's *Odyssey*, which has brought us face to face with some of the most beautiful language, some of the most extraordinary creatures and places, and some of the greatest terrors and noblest sentiments ever concocted by the imagination of man? If our journey has been a fruitful one, we have gained a renewed appreciation for both the power and the necessity of the imagination in shaping our lives. We have learned that the moral life is less about do's and don't's, commandments and prohibitions, than about exploration and discovery. To choose freely the kind of lives we will lead, we must know what we are doing, and to really know what we chose we must know what we forego.

The greatest danger in life is not that our deepest desires will be denied, but that our most unimaginative desires will be granted. Calypso, the Lotus-Eaters, the Cyclops – they each show us a powerful and powerfully alluring path for human life. But each is also a path of ignorance, a turning away from the quest and the light. By showing us lives lived with eyes half closed, these tales help us to understand more clearly and deeply what we really need to know. Consider Calypso. What does her name mean? It comes from the same root as our word eclipse, a hiding of the light. In the *Odyssey* Homer invites us to open our eyes, to see the full range of human possibilities fully illuminated, and to make as imaginative and thereby free a choice as we possibly can about the kind of life we aspire to. This, and nothing else, is freedom's greatest odyssey.