

2001: A Philosophical Odyssey

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If you have not read the *Odyssey* lately you are missing a real treat. It is a swell yarn. It has adventures, monsters, and hair-raising escapes. It tells a complex series of inter-nested stories about three journeys of personal transformation: not only that of Odysseus, but also those of his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus. In fact, you can argue that the book is at least as much about them as about its purported hero. All three face dangers and temptations that require them to confront their own character, and in this self-examination each must recognize that the very qualities that enable him or her to survive pose at the same time a problem, a barrier to be overcome. In this sense the *Odyssey* is a book about learning and change, about becoming.

Here I want to re-examine these adventures through a philosophical lens. So many of the *Odyssey's* stories and characters are familiar even if we have not read the book (the Cyclops, Scylla, and Charybdis — the proverbial rock and a hard place — the Sirens) that it can be viewed as a compendium of allegories for human conundrums or temptations. How Odysseus confronts these adversaries and overcomes or circumvents them presents us, I will suggest, with some interesting metaphors for ways of thinking philosophically — and the dangers and temptations inherent in them.

ODYSSEUS' VIRTUE

The rosy-red light of Dawn shines upon Odysseus, weary of war, as he sets out from Troy after ten years of battle to return home in Ithaca. He does not know that it will be ten more years before he will arrive there. His great contribution to ending the siege of that walled city was the stratagem of building a large wooden horse to smuggle himself and a small band of warriors inside its walls. In this, Odysseus demonstrated his courage and skill in battle, but even more it showed his cunning — in Greek, the virtue of *mêtis*.

This virtue occupied a central role in early Greek thought. Originally, *Mêtis* was the goddess pursued by Zeus (though she tried to escape him by assuming various animal shapes), captured by him, and finally swallowed by him because it was said that her second child would eventually take over Zeus' throne. Their first child, Athena, burst forth fully formed from Zeus' head — and Athena, the goddess of practical intelligence, handicrafts, geometry, and military strategy, was a benefactor of Odysseus and an inspiration to Greek culture generally. This mythology is important here because it shows the importance the Greeks placed upon the idea of *mêtis* and the relation they saw between *mêtis* and the central activities of their civic and military life. The term *mêtis* can be translated variously as an artifice, strategy, or plan — but it also represents the capacity to formulate these, especially under duress. *Mêtis* is the distinctive virtue of Odysseus, not only in Homer's epics, but in other literary representations of him. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is frequently referred to with the epithet *polymêtis*, or “man of many wiles.”

Odysseus is characterized variously as “shrewd,” “subtle,” “sly,” “suave,” “wily,” “clever,” “cunning,” “deft,” “tactful,” “scheming,” and “crafty.” In this constellation of qualities, we see the range of connotations *mêtis* carries (along with related terms, such as *dolos*) — the capacity for skillful planning, but also the capacity for manipulation and deceit. Indeed, other representations of Odysseus (such as in Sophocles’ play *Philoctetes*) emphasize this latter dimension of his character, and he is sometimes portrayed as far from a hero. Homer’s Odysseus shows all sides of this complex virtue and makes clear that simple judgments about whether *mêtis* is good or bad do not help us in understanding it. *Mêtis* is certainly what allows Odysseus to survive to see his wife and son again. But Homer also shows us that Odysseus continues to lie and strategize in situations where doing so is unnecessary, or even counterproductive. He is frequently, as we say, too clever for his own good. Because the core of the *Odyssey* is composed of Odysseus’ own account of his adventures during his long trip home, we also see the creative capacity for weaving tales as a dimension of *mêtis*. (And, by the way, it has also been suggested that Metis was the name of Homer’s own mother.¹) The *Odyssey* is at heart a tale about telling tales.

Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant argue that this crucial dimension of intellect was neglected by later Greek thought, which focused more on *episteme* and the pursuit of Truth.² Yet in their view,

There is no doubt that *mêtis* is a type of intelligence and thought...[I]t implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic.³

They add that because *mêtis* was never formulated and defined clearly in any theoretical work, “It always appears more or less below the surface, immersed as it were in practical operations which, even when they use it, show no concern to make its nature explicit or to justify its procedures.”⁴ As a result, philosophers have rarely shown much interest in *mêtis*. Part of my purpose here is to resurrect this virtue as a feature of philosophical thought.

ODYSSEUS’ ADVENTURES

As just noted, the most familiar parts of the *Odyssey* — the encounters of Odysseus and his men with the Cyclops, the Sirens, and other gods and monsters during their long journey home from Troy — actually take up a rather short portion of the whole (Books 9-12 out of 24).⁵ They constitute a narrative told by Odysseus as he regales his hosts the Phaeacians, who have befriended him on his way back to Ithaca. This structure constitutes not only a tale within the tale of the *Odyssey* overall; it also invites us to reflect on the act of story-telling, of weaving tales and spinning yarns. And, although it is not my main concern here, this parallels the image of Penelope, Odysseus’ wife, weaving by day and then unweaving her work at night as a way of forestalling the suitors who have occupied her home on the assumption that she is a widow available for marriage; Penelope exhibits her own brand of *mêtis*. The *Odyssey* is not a straight narrative and it is not all about Odysseus; there is a

continual cutting back and forth between different characters, different time frames, and different narrative points of view.

But in Odysseus' recounting of his adventures, and in other narratives attached to it, we encounter a series of monsters, some of them divine, who populate the world in which the *Odyssey* takes place. These monsters are worth taking seriously. We live in a time when the term "monster" merely means a terrifying, vicious creature, or when "monstrous" just means huge and horrible; but as Jeffrey Cohen reminds us, the etymology of the term derives from "monstrum": "that which reveals," "that which warns." Monsters are fantastic creatures, combining elements that do not occur together naturally, such as gryphons, centaurs, or unicorns. In this, a monster can be a divine portent, a marvel: "Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself."⁶ Monsters, mutants, and hybrids contain differences within them; they resist natural types and categories — and in this provide occasion for questioning how "natural" those types and categories actually are.

And so it should be no surprise that one of the first of these characters we meet in the *Odyssey* is Proteus, the shape-shifting Old Man of the Sea. Proteus changes form, from serpent, to panther, to wild boar, to torrent of water, to tree, in the attempt to resist capture — and here it is worth recalling that Mêtis also metamorphosed to resist capture by Zeus.⁷ The *Odyssey* is full of stories of disguise, impersonation, and deception, and Odysseus in particular frequently employs this stratagem, this *mêtis*, in his adventures and escapes right up until his arrival home, when a crucial theme is whether he will be recognized by any of his household after twenty years away. But the book clearly adds the question of what it means to be "the same" person, whether a person who has come to assume so many roles, almost reflexively, is ever the same person *even to himself*.

When we first encounter Odysseus in the book, he is trapped on the island of Calypso, homesick, weeping at the shore. We are told that he is kept on the island "by force," but Homer goes out of his way to tell us how luxurious his accommodations are, how lovely and beguiling Calypso is. Of all the gods and monsters who conspire to prevent him from returning home, she is clearly the greatest threat (he remains on the island for seven years). In the order of events, Odysseus has already survived many threats to life and limb, although his ship and crew have not. After years of war, and then years more of dodging giants, vengeful gods, and sea demons, it must be a temptation indeed to rest a while on this peaceful island — yet every day, we are told, he sobs and groans to be able to return home. Even when Calypso, under order from Zeus, agrees to send him on his way, Odysseus, ever suspicious, at first refuses, convinced that this is one more trick or trap. Odysseus *polymêtis* remains most of all the prisoner of his own character; he cannot help but attribute to others the deviousness of purpose that has become second nature to him.

Released by Calypso, Odysseus survives a storm at sea and is washed ashore on the isle of Phaeacia, where he is helped by the local king to prepare a ship in order to return home. Comforted and aided by his hosts the Phaeacians, Odysseus repays them at a great banquet in his honor by recounting the many adventures that had taken him from the shores of Troy to his confinement on Calypso's isle: these are the memorable sections from Books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*.

Soon after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his crew encountered the Lotus-Eaters, whose honey-sweet fruit did them no harm except to deprive them of the desire to return home.

Later, they arrived on the island of the Cyclops, where they were captured by the one-eyed giant Polyphemus, who intended to devour them. Odysseus planned their escape, a complex plot that included disguise and, at the crucial moment, blinding Polyphemus by stabbing his eye. In making his escape, Odysseus could not resist a joke, telling the monster that his name is “Outis” (“Nobody”). When Polyphemus called his friends and neighbors for help, he was asked who did this to him: “Nobody,” he replied, and so of course they ignored him. This pun is magnified when the phrase “ou-tis” is rendered in the conditional voice as “me-tis.”⁸

Their next encounter was with Circe, “the nymph with lovely braids,” who sought to ensnare Odysseus and his crew in excesses of food and drink and, once again, drugs that sapped them of their desire to leave. They stayed with her a year. A consequence of their gluttony was that Odysseus’ men were turned into swine and he needed to trick Circe to get her to restore their human form. Part of Odysseus’ mission required him to descend to the Kingdom of the Dead to receive a prophecy from the blind seer Tiresias; while there he met the ghosts of many of his former colleagues in arms, including King Agamemnon, who told him of the treachery of his wife Clytemnestra, who in conspiracy with Aegisthus plotted to murder him upon his return from Troy. This story is undoubtedly echoing in Odysseus’ head as he approaches his own home, later.

After leaving Circe’s island, Odysseus and his crew narrowly escaped the Sirens, whose spellbinding voices tempt men ashore, never to leave. To avoid this, Odysseus told his men to plug up their ears with beeswax, while lashing him to the mast so that he could hear the voices but would be unable to drive the ship ashore. This is a strategy suggested to him by Circe, who also advised him on how to navigate the narrow strait between the twin monsters Scylla and Charybdis. Circe also warned him, as did the seer Tiresias, to avoid the island of the Sungod Helios and to leave his cattle untouched. Unfortunately, Odysseus and his crew did not follow this advice, his men slaughtered and ate the cattle, and as a result Odysseus’ ship was wrecked, his crew destroyed, and he was marooned on the island of Calypso for seven long years.

ODYSSEUS’ RETURN

Finally, after his release from Calypso’s island and with the assistance of the Phaeacians, Odysseus returns home. But his difficulties are not over. An army of suitors has occupied his home, all hoping for the hand of the presumably widowed Penelope. His son Telemachus is intimidated and ineffectual in protecting the family estate. Odysseus himself is uncertain about the reception he will receive from his own family after these twenty years away (he remembers the story of Agamemnon). And he intends to slaughter all of the suitors who have been tormenting his family and abusing their hospitality.

So, in typical fashion, he returns in disguise, testing the loyalty of each servant and member of the household before revealing himself to them. The central theme

of this final section of the *Odyssey* is the theme of recognition: who recognizes him, and by what identifier they know him (touchingly, his old dog Argos is one of the first to do so). But recognition is complicated by the fact that Odysseus is not yet sure that he *wants* to be recognized, and by the many changes wrought in Odysseus by his experiences. He has been transformed by years of war and years further of suffering and travail during his long journey home. He is untrusting, suspicious, not unproblematically suited for a simple return to domestic life, and so his own identity is in play also: Having gained what he hoped for so long, is it what he expected? Is he ready for it? Odysseus has been living through his wits for so long that role-playing, strategizing, and deception have become almost his primary nature; is he prepared to give up these habits in a context where they are no longer suitable?

Establishing identity is a problematic idea at a time when there are no “objective” measures or records of a person: no photographs, no fingerprints, no identification cards. There is only the operation of memory and the social affirmation of a commonly shared judgment. To recognize something is to see in it something familiar — but this is partly evidentiary and partly interpretive. For Odysseus, the closest we come to “proof” is a scar that is recognized, first, by his childhood nurse Eurycleia — a scar resulting from a hunting accident when he was a boy. But in the crucial moment, his reunion with his wife Penelope, even such physical proof is not enough to convince her; like Odysseus, she has spent so many years using her wiles to protect herself that even in this moment she must test him, as he tests her. It is apparent from the text that she already suspected that this stranger is Odysseus, even early on, yet she withholds this recognition until it is no longer clear whether she truly still has doubts or whether she simply must get over the reluctance to admit to herself what on some level she already knows. And this is made no easier by Odysseus’ suspicions and his stubbornness in releasing his identity only when it suits his intentions.

What is fascinating about this climactic encounter is that it illuminates the complex and sometimes paradoxical character of recognition. It is not simply a way of knowing, based on evidence or proof, because in recognition what is taken as evidence is already interpreted, filtered through memory and imagination. What was unfamiliar now becomes familiar. It is like the phenomenon of “seeing as” — seeing a figure as a duck or as a rabbit — because what shifts is not a characteristic of the thing observed. Socially collective processes can influence or reinforce this shift, and for many official purposes such social recognition is decisive. But still a doubter can find a reason to question it.

Penelope maintains her doubt until the very end, and it is only when Odysseus reveals an intimate knowledge of their marriage bed, which he designed and built himself, that she yields up her belief. They talk on through the night, recounting their tales, until weary Odysseus is able to rest at last, sleeping in his own bed alongside his wife.

JOURNEYS AND CHANGES

Well, as I said, it is a swell yarn. But what is philosophically interesting about these encounters? The literary metaphor of a journey is frequently used to illustrate

a process of personal change; here I want to explore the question of what constitutes a *philosophical* change. I want to use the narrative of Odysseus' adventures as a framework for developing some ideas about the condition of being a philosopher, and for recounting a few of the temptations that can beguile us. Finally, I want to suggest some of the ways in which *mêtis* can constitute a way of thinking philosophically.

Odysseus' journey is one of *returning*; he is travelling both to leave one place, and to come back to another. In order to complete this journey, he must *pass through* many stages, and avoid many temptations and diversions along the way. He is often lost, and at a loss in knowing how to get to where he wants to be. He needs to find a path, a way. Furthermore, his journey is not just a matter of getting from point A to B, however arduous that trip might be; it is also a matter of his changing, being changed by the experiences he will undergo. In order to move from a site of war to one of domesticity, he must learn patience and gentleness; in order to move from one of strategy to one of intimacy and honesty, he must learn modesty, learn the limits of *mêtis*. Throughout this entire journey, the greatest temptation is not to return at all, to stay with what is comfortable and familiar. His arrival home is a victory in one sense, but tragic in another. He has failed to bring the men he is responsible for back alive. He has learned his dependence on other people, and not only on his own wits, to survive. Securing his home and family requires him once again to slaughter dozens of men and women, now within the confines of his own household. This is not the homecoming he imagined, marooned on the shores of Calypso's isle.

How is this like the process of philosophical change? By "philosophical change" I do not mean the modification of this position or that, the refinement of an argument, the honing of a distinction — I mean those times in a philosopher's life when things you were very sure of seem no longer tenable; when you come to look at familiar positions and see them in a new light; when the frame or box around what you have always assumed to be true becomes apparent to you, and the existence of important considerations outside that frame becomes impossible to ignore.

A philosophical change is not a change from a false belief to a true one. Often the very things that one believed retain much of the appeal they always had: we see that, but we also recognize that we cannot believe them in quite the same way any longer. Philosophical change is about returning to things you were sure were true and seeing them differently — returning to the same Ithaca, but yet also an unfamiliar one. The feel or tone of this shift is not one of victory, or superceding a mistaken belief: it is a recognition of greater complexity and uncertainty, and it is frequently accompanied by feelings of doubt, puzzlement...and real loss.

I think here for example of some of the "post" positions that are so popular today, and sometimes tossed around as if centuries of serious philosophical work had been suddenly rendered obsolete. And I ask you to consider two ways in which such positions might be arrived at: one is by those who once embraced varieties of those traditional views, yet over time came to find them inadequate, seeing in them antinomies or lacunae that could no longer be overlooked; the other is by those whose first and only introduction to philosophy is through these "post" ideas (I

imagine someone reading Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, for example, without having read any of the authors it refers to). It seems clear to me that the latter sort of person will find it far easier to settle into the idea that some kind of fundamental *progress* has been made, that philosophy has made important advances by no longer wasting time on outmoded positions that are not worth worrying about any more.

I think the first sort of person will view this matter very differently, and will not be able to see the change as a simple abandonment of what is no longer worthy for the embrace of something new and better. In my account here, the first sort of person will realize what has been lost, because he or she has *passed through* these positions, seeing why they were plausible, knowing what important questions they helped to address, appreciating the arguments that led smart people to formulate them. And if, in the end, they hold an "incredulity" toward these metanarratives — what I prefer to think of as an *inability to believe* them — this is not the same thing as having refuted or superseded them.⁹

My own favorite example here is Ludwig Wittgenstein, probably the most famous example of a philosopher fundamentally changing his mind about some very basic philosophical views. When people compare the view of language in the *Tractatus* with that in the *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, a popular debate is whether there are "two Wittgensteins" (holding an early and later set of incompatible theses) or only "one" (who simply evolved his view into a more comprehensive view of language, without necessarily abandoning any of his previous views). To me, this characterization misses what is most interesting about this philosophical change: I think Wittgenstein always appreciated why he had found the earlier views so appealing, even as he came to find them limited and inadequate. It was not a matter of his rejecting a flawed thesis and replacing it with a better one, nor a simple matter of elaborating an incomplete model by adding to it. I think the key point here is that he retained *both* a nostalgia for the more positivistic view of language, truth, and clarity, the austere landscape of the *Tractatus*, and a *fundamental* discomfort with that way of looking at the world. I do not think one can understand the strange, peripatetic course of his life choices, and his complicated, inconsistent statements of philosophical substance, without appreciating how difficult and unsettling this journey was for him.¹⁰

Philosophical thinking, in this account, is more about puzzles than proofs. It is less about stacking up truths to build a temple of certainty, and more about revisiting familiar, troubling problems again and again, seeing in them each time something different. We mark the changes in these different versions not simply as stages on a path of progress, but as markers of how *we* have changed — and while obviously it can be very important to us to regard these changes as constituting some kind of growth or advancement, I think it is sometimes very difficult to see that unproblematically, as in all ways a gain and not a loss.

"Growth," that wonderful Deweyan catch-all, expresses the faith of a certain kind of pragmatism in the capacity of humans to solve problems, to meliorate conflicts, to correct errors. Dewey believed this about the individual, and about

democratic society generally. This belief undergirds his liberalism and his hope in progress. But while now is not the occasion for pressing this case, I think we need to consider a pragmatic view that does not have a faith in growth, in progress. We need to place under suspicion ideals like “growth,” which depict a unidirectional path of development and which overlook, or minimize, the possibility that every step forward is also a step back, or two steps back; that every problem solved is a new — and sometimes more dire — problem created. Pragmatism, in my view, lacks a recognition of tragedy.¹¹

The broader outlook I am putting forth here regards philosophical change as a process of dis-enchantment, of losing faith in certain beliefs in a way that is difficult to regard simply as growth or improvement. Of course it is in one sense the journey we choose, and along the way we are making decisions with as much thoughtfulness and seriousness as possible — certainly we are trying to make better choices, to learn, to become something we aspire to be. Perhaps, if we are fortunate, we see ourselves approaching some Ithaca, of gaining a return to a sense of stability, familiarity, and rest. But as we arrive there, we discover that it is not what we expected, and that we are not the people we thought we would be when we got there.¹²

Odysseus, during his long journey home, makes many mistakes with no chance to correct them. As I noted, he fails at the one thing a commander must pursue, the leadership and protection of his crew: they survive the direst of external threats, but succumb ultimately to their own weaknesses and appetites. At the core of his changes, I believe, is his recognition of his own limits, facing the deep irony that the hero of Troy is reduced to posing as a beggar to re-enter his own home, accepting his dependence on the most humble people if he is to survive. Much of this is galling to him, but it works a change in him that, in my view, makes him a better husband and father.

The essence of philosophical change is the recognition of one’s *being wrong*, not as an error to be corrected but as an unavoidable imperfection in any philosophical thesis or system; and the sense of being wrong is as galling and difficult for the philosopher as the sense of failure is for the hero. The question is, How can this sense of uncertainty support an attitude toward philosophy that is productive and not paralyzing?

MÉTIS AND PHILOSOPHY

Mêtis is an ambiguous virtue: both craft and craftiness, both open-mindedness and opportunism. At its core is the idea of changeability, adaptiveness, and it is easy to see in this its advantages and its dangers. In the *Odyssey*, as I have described, Homer is careful to show us that Odysseus is often too clever for his own good; in the remarkable encounter between Odysseus and his wife Penelope, we see two people who have lived and survived through *mêtis* for years, unable or unwilling to give up that disposition as each tests the other. They are equally matched in their strengths and in their failings; their reunion is attained only over their own stubbornness and recalcitrance. As with all virtues, the central challenge of this human quality is in knowing when it is *not* called for, when it may be counterproductive of other goods.

Detienne and Vernant tell us that *mêtis* is the mode of reasoning best suited to “situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting, and ambiguous,” and I think this is a pretty good characterization of philosophy. It is a way of thinking that looks for the complexity in what appears simple, and the simplicity in what appears complex. It involves careful planning and creative problem-solving; finding a way out of a sticky situation where there does not appear to be one (I associate it with Wittgenstein’s dictum that philosophy is trying to show the fly the way out of the fly bottle). Sarah Kofman links *mêtis* with overcoming *aporia* — the lack of a *poros*, a way — it is making your way when there is no map.¹³ The creative activities of making a way include navigating, negotiating, exploring, and back-tracking, in a context where there is no single path or solution. This is what we see Odysseus doing in his adventures, and this is, I believe, a fruitful and provocative way of thinking about thinking philosophically.

The Lotus Eaters confronted Odysseus and his men with the temptation to resist change, not to risk going further in their journey. In the same way, certain kinds of abstraction have a philosophical appeal because we imagine that what we are studying is of the unchanging, eternal realm. The problem with such abstraction is that it can freeze thought, stop the asking of certain kinds of questions. Broad general principles or truths cannot provide an account of the exceptions, or conflicted cases, that present us with the most deeply troubling dilemmas; in particular, they cannot draw the boundaries of their own scope of applicability — or even more seriously, the contexts in which they actually yield up effects opposite to those they prescribe. Yet this is frequently the case.

The Cyclops is vulnerable to Odysseus’ plan because he has only one eye. Monocular philosophy sees what it sees and does not see what it cannot see. This is the problem with various philosophical “isms.” Monocular philosophies can generate internal questions, and often these are of real import; but the limit of their capacity to question or criticize themselves is bounded by the assumptions that they cannot question because they do not even recognize them as assumptions. Philosophy requires a certain kind of binocularism, I think: the possibility of holding certain beliefs while at the same time seriously appreciating the perspectives from which those beliefs might be problematic.

Circe confronts Odysseus and his men with a different kind of temptation: extraordinary comfort and material pleasure. As with the Lotus Eaters, this is a way of stopping thought, creating complacency and stasis. Few philosophers have to worry about extraordinary material temptations, but at a more modest level the problem remains the same: balancing the professional obligations and rewards systems of a job (and most of us here are lucky enough to do this for a living, or aspire to) without abandoning the untethered freedom of thought that attracted us to the philosophical endeavor in the first place.

The Sirens pose in some ways an even greater threat because their charms are irresistible to those who hear them. Hence Odysseus’ plan, aided by Circe, of plugging his crew’s ears with beeswax while being lashed himself to the mast of the ship. Jon Elster describes this story as the paradigm case of what he calls “imperfect

rationality.”¹⁴ In cases like this, the rational person must recognize the limits of his or her rationality and compensate accordingly. Elster sees the case as a basic matter of self-control, and certainly self-control is another of Odysseus’ virtues in this book. But I see this story differently — for one thing, there is no *reason* why Odysseus needs to keep his ears unplugged. Rather, I see this story as an illustration of the inability of rationality, or any other general quality of human character, to recognize the limits of its own applicability. For any X that is generally good (reason, caring, honesty), a fundamental question is when *not* to be or do X; and that question, by definition, needs to be considered from some other standpoint — X itself cannot answer it.

Scylla and Charybdis are the twin dangers between which Odysseus must navigate his boat. What we know (since Circe has told Odysseus), and his crew does not, is that a number of them will almost certainly have to perish in the process. Odysseus must accept responsibility for deceiving his men in order to keep up their spirit and effort in the face of terrifying danger, while knowing that he is condemning some of them to death. Philosophically, Scylla and Charybdis represent the clearly unacceptable alternatives between which imperfect choice must operate. And here nautical terms like “navigating” and “negotiating” seem apt: there is not any single correct path and it is not as simple as finding an exact “middle.” Rather, we struggle to find a third way, tugged toward the rocks on one hand and a whirlpool on the other, so that our choices are influenced by a kind of gravitational attraction toward one or the other of the alternatives, or both. In such cases there can be no right answer.

By the time Odysseus is washed ashore on the island of Calypso he has already lost his ship and crew. And even though Homer tells us that Odysseus weeps every day at the thought of missing his home and family, he also makes quite apparent the appeal of remaining with Calypso. Odysseus, after all, has just gone through a devastating loss, for which he must partly blame himself. The failure to bring his ship and crew safely home is a heavy burden for him to have to explain to others. And he must be wondering whether the gods will ever allow him to return home anyway. Meanwhile, Calypso has made her own desire for him more than clear, and unlike Circe this promise of comfort and pleasure is not accompanied by the threat of being trapped or turned into a beast. Philosophically, I liken this temptation to the danger of settling into a reputation or set of positions that get attributed to you at a certain stage of your career. Developing ideas that others find appealing or persuasive is part of why we do this work; yet at the very moment that you have done so, the process of fossilization starts to set in — where one’s own thinking may have moved on, others want to hear you explain and advocate the views they associate with you. As many accomplished philosophers can explain, this is a terrible nuisance sometimes (like popular musicians who only get requests for their “oldies” when they perform live). But more seriously, this can be death to fresh thinking when it tempts philosophers simply to graft refinements or variations onto their established views. Such temptations block the processes of philosophical change and creativity.

Odysseus is able to avoid, escape, or circumvent these dangers and temptations because of his *mêtis*. His cleverness in formulating strategies, sometimes aided by divine counsel, relies upon a certain capacity for adaptation under duress. He is often

able to formulate a third way because he can approach a problem unencumbered by static assumptions. He is ingenious in recombining and using what is available at hand in inventive new ways. He recognizes an opportunity when it is present for him, and he knows how to seize it. He understands the unreliability of others' poses, because he is a man of many forms himself. In its worst aspects, *mêtis* makes him hypersuspicious, devious, and opportunistic. But this is the same capacity that makes him creative, ingenious, and, well, opportunistic.

I am not suggesting here that *mêtis* is the only way to think philosophically, or that it is the best way. If you have been following with me at all, you see the pointlessness of claiming such things. Of course we are trying to give good arguments, to be as clear as possible, to critique views that are confused or ill-considered. If we are not doing that, we are not doing philosophy. But the perspective of *mêtis* allows us to see the ways in which such activities are piecemeal, not systematic; imperfect, and often inconclusive; and bounded by consequences in the world that we need to attend to and be responsible for. In short, *mêtis* allows us to cope with a philosophy that has become *monstrous*.

LIVING WITH A MONSTROUS PHILOSOPHY

Let me return to the question of what it means to *be* a philosopher. As Richard Shusterman writes, "if philosophy is a life-practice rather than a mere field of theoretical knowledge, then separating philosophical thought from the lived context of the philosopher could constitute a gross distortion of its actual meaning and value."¹⁵ More poignantly, Wittgenstein wrote:

What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, and if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life.... I know that it's difficult to think *well* about "certainty," "probability," "perception." But it is, if possible, still more difficult to think, or to try to think, really honestly about your life and other people's lives.¹⁶

Being a philosopher is also, in my view, adopting a certain attitude toward ideas. It is more fox than hedgehog (I think it was Isaiah Berlin who wrote that the fox knows many things, the hedgehog only knows one big thing). It is a matter of being at least as interested in asking questions as in answering them. It is a matter of understanding that proof is not an attainment of human knowledge outside of some very particular areas of mathematics and logic. It accepts the inevitability of *being wrong*, because it also understands the potential fruitfulness of being wrong in an interesting way.

Society needs philosophers not because it needs somebody to prove things to them, but because it needs people whose role it is to think differently, to stand outside convention and consider alternatives that, however outlandish, enlarge the scope of human possibility. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their wonderful little book *What is Philosophy?* write that "philosophy is the discipline that involves *creating* concepts. The object of philosophy is to create concepts that are always new."¹⁷ From this standpoint, the polysemic nature of our concepts, what some analytic philosophers used to criticize as vagueness, ambiguity, and equivocation, is in fact a condition for the possibility of thinking anew. Creativity is not a term generally embraced by philosophers, who see in it connotations of literariness or, even worse,

fiction. But even when they do not intend to do so, philosophers who are thinking deeply about issues are crafting, creating something new — shifting our perspective on something familiar. The settling of assumptions into standardized conventions is a natural habit, one that philosophy seeks to resist. Deleuze and Guattari quote Nietzsche: “[Philosophers] must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify and polish them, but first *make* and *create* them.... Hitherto one has generally trusted one’s concepts as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland.”¹⁸

This is why we need monsters (hybrids, mutants, creoles) — they force us to reexamine our concepts. They resist classification, and in this remind us of the effects our categories have in normalizing our expectations about the “natural” divisions of the world.¹⁹ They contain within them differences that our preconceptions tell us cannot be reconciled; socially they are often outcasts, nomads travelling across and outside borders that social norms want to keep as permanent divisions. They make philosophy aware of its frequent culpability in these processes, that circles of inclusion always also define boundaries of exclusion; and this should make our attitude toward our own concepts and categories ambivalent — we need to create them and use them, but we also need continually to recreate them, to question them even as we rely upon them. This ambivalence is part of what I called earlier “binocularism,” and this is a characteristic of monstrous philosophy. In particular, we need to be suspicious of the distinctions and either/or dichotomies that often delimit our capacity to describe and to understand complex and ambiguous phenomena; the philosopher is often “in-between,” reflecting both and neither of the alternatives.²⁰ Our way is often a third way, not an average or a middle of the road, but a reconception of the choices that belies that way of dividing things. Dewey obviously taught us about this; but what Foucault and others add to Dewey is a sociopolitical critique of who is harmed by those distinctions and dichotomies, and how their social effects bear upon the responsibility of philosophy in either reinforcing or in challenging them.

Philosophical “isms” tend to work against such binocularism, because participation in an ism means by definition an embrace of most of a position without modification; where there are criticisms, these are internal criticisms that leave most of the doctrine untouched. I have already touched upon how isms can interfere with fresh thinking, but here I want to touch upon a different point: How isms need each other. Many philosophical schools of thought seek to supplant their alternatives: they criticize them as a means of persuading people to abandon them. But a monstrous philosophy is always trying to put together and juxtapose ideas that others say must be kept separate — which is another variety of either/or thinking. Isms need external questions as much as internal ones, and these can come only from those who have fundamental doubts about those positions; yet there is a tendency to disregard such criticisms by drawing Kuhnian paradigmatic boundaries and attributing criticism from others to “just not getting it.” Well, misunderstanding is always a possibility, of course. But often what people call misunderstanding is just *understanding differently*, and from this standpoint an opportunity is being missed for

seeing one's own presuppositions from a challenging point of view. I think that examples of this failing can be seen across the philosophical spectrum.²¹

When philosophers have *passed through* various philosophical changes on their way to new positions, I think it becomes harder for them to do this. It is easier for them to see, or to imagine, the coherence of certain questions from within an alternative mode of thought, even if it is not their own. This is part of what *mêtis* helps philosophy to do; the artful dodger can be slippery in moving across and between different purported camps, but he or she can also make plausible a range of possibilities that enlarges the conversation.

What should philosophy be about, then? If we are not pursuing truth, goodness, beauty, and justice, what are we doing? Well, I think we *are* pursuing truth, goodness, beauty, and justice, but not in the way many philosophers have thought. We are not the adjudicators of what these things are; instead, we are trying to create concepts and perspectives that support *conditions of possibility* for thinking about them, talking about them, so that the broader social processes of adjudicating them can remain vital and effective. This process of creation entails reexamining and questioning those concepts and perspectives, as we have traditionally done, and it means suggesting new ones.

This process could be characterized as a kind of problem-solving, except that these sorts of problems are never really solved — it is often at least as much a matter of problem-posing. Hence this also involves changing the way we understand a philosophical “problem”: not as an equation to be solved, or a question to be answered, or a path to be mapped out, but as a state of doubt or puzzlement that persists, and metamorphoses — that stays with us, but in constantly changing form. Sometimes, perhaps, we discover that a philosophical problem we thought was important is not so crucial as we imagined; but this will mean supplanting it with a new one. That is why I think terminology about “progress” and “growth” is not well-suited to philosophical thinking. We are making our way, as best we can, where there are no maps and cannot be. As with *mêtis*, this means working with whatever is available at hand and trying to use it in an unexpected way. It also means, I think, avoiding some of the temptations discussed earlier that get in the way of philosophical change and creativity.

And always, like Odysseus, we return to our selves. What kind of philosopher are we trying to be? Philosophy as an ongoing engagement with difficulty does not offer some of the satisfactions we might wish for; there are few resting points that do not become uncomfortable after a while. One has to get used to being accompanied nearly all the time by an uneasy sense of *being wrong*, and it does not matter what you do to try to assuage that, because any new position ends up feeling the same way soon enough. This perpetual return to the same place, but each time in a different way, is the philosophical odyssey I have tried to explore here. It is not very heroic, unless you consider *mêtis* to be a quality of heroes. Homer did; Sophocles did not. I am holding it up to you as something to consider.

Or, after all, maybe I am just wrong about all this.

1. H.G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, the Homeric Myths, and Homerica* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 569.
2. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 4, 317-18.
3. *Ibid.*, 3-4.
4. *Ibid.*, 3.
5. Here I am relying on the version recently translated by Robert Fagles: *The Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).
6. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4. My ideas here are indebted to readings of Donna Haraway, Judith Butler, and many others.
7. Laura Slatkin, "Composition by Theme and the *Mêtis* of the Odyssey," in *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. Seth L. Schein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 235.
8. William G. Thalmann, *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 85-86.
9. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Postmodern Doubt and Philosophy of Education," *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 39-48.
10. See especially the moving account provided by Ray Monk's excellent intellectual biography, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).
11. Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 469-79.
12. If you find this notion appealing, you might look at Constantine Cavafy's beautiful and wise poem "Ithaka."
13. Sarah Kofman, "Beyond Aporia?" in *Post-structuralist Classics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1988), 8-11. See also Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 18, 112, 144. These ideas played a central role in influencing my essay "Aporias, Webs, and Passages: Doubt as an Opportunity to Learn," *Curriculum Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2000): 171-87.
14. Jon Elster, "Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality," in *Ulysses and the Sirens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 36.
15. Richard Shusterman, "Profiles of the Philosophical Life: Dewey, Wittgenstein, Foucault," in *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 18-19.
16. Quoted in Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 39.
17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Gordon Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 2, 5.
18. Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 6.
19. See Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).
20. Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 28-32.
21. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Pluralism and Monism in Philosophy of Education"; presented at the 1998 Philosophy of Education Society annual meeting. Available online at: <http://faculty.ed.uiuc.edu/burbules/ncb/papers/plur.html>

THE IDEAS IN THIS ESSAY BENEFITED from many conversations with Ralph Page.