

## A Fractured Fairy Tale: *Pleonexia* and the Psychopath

*Nothing is enough to someone for whom enough is little.*

--Epicurus

*The comfort of the rich depends upon an abundant supply of the poor.*

--Voltaire

If you've read our essay, *Are You a Capitalist?* in the Capitalism Critiqued section you came across the word *pleonexia*. In this section we hope to give you a full understanding of what that word means employing both a historiography and a philosophical analysis. By way of introduction *pleonexia* is an imbalance suffered by individuals that destabilizes individuals, society and the natural world. It is a sickness, a form of psychopathy. *Pleonexia* is a Greek word often translated as greed, but better understood as the insatiable desire to acquire, accumulate or obtain more of anything, whether money, property, power or what have you. It is the imbalanced state of never being satisfied. Thus those suffering most from *pleonexia* mirror the singular attribute of capital: reproduction. Indeed capital can be thought of as the modern synthetic construction that enables the affliction to thrive—and *Capitalism* will be shown to be the institutionalization of the disease. As capital can never rest, so too the *pleonexic* is never sated—and so the affliction creates the conditions necessary for itself. Greed is often limited to the idea of wealth and so, as will be shown, is inadequate if we want to get a full grasp on our social condition.

Wealth, especially extreme wealth, is very often a characteristic of those who suffer from *pleonexia*, but wealth is best thought of as the disease presenting itself through an economic system, enabled by that system. It can be a symptom and an effect of what Aristotle called a "deranged soul." Thus, those who suffer most from this disease will naturally accumulate the most material wealth and power as well (either as a direct pursuit or as a consequence). It stands to reason if someone spends all their energy towards a singular pursuit they would very often become accomplished. Wealth itself is not an evil, nor are those who possess it necessarily sufferers. Wealth is a symptom and must be parsed from the condition.

And so, as capital has been given an ontological status of a being whose single attribute is infinite reproduction (and thus may be thought of as never satisfied), it is the people who pursue the purity of their affliction, unreservedly and often with great hubris, who we must repudiate and overcome. We must begin to understand and recognize these people as psychopaths, those whose world-view consists entirely as a projection of themselves, in fact their illness, without regard for others. Unbound by any social norms they are, like capital, amoral at best. Once we understand these people we will see more clearly that the institution and ideology of *capitalism* is itself *pleonexic* and is therefore untenable on all fronts: psychological, philosophical, sociological, economic and environmental.

Psychopaths are, "self-centered, dishonest and undependable...largely devoid of guilt, empathy and love..." say Psychology Professors Lilienfeld and Arkowitz writing in the *Scientific American*. And so, "Not surprisingly, psychopaths are overrepresented in prisons...studies indicate that about 25 percent of inmates meet diagnostic criteria for psychopathy." But recognizing psychopaths is a difficult task, say the authors, because they are, "Superficially charming...tend to make a good first impression and often strike observers as remarkably normal," and so are often able to achieve high social status. In fact they

“may be overrepresented in certain occupations, such as politics, business and entertainment,” although the authors suggest the evidence is preliminary.<sup>1</sup> It is the absence of the two deeply human characteristics of *empathy and love* with which we are concerned.

Not all psychopaths are *pleonexic*, but all *pleonexics* are psychopaths. Just because someone slashes their way through society’s norms does not mean they possess the property of in-satiety, the essence of capital. But someone who is forever and unreservedly on the quest for more, someone who mirrors the reproductive property of capital, must be said to be psychopathic. We will argue that our social order is hierarchical in the worst possible way: we enable the pleonexic-psychopath and disable the empathic; we elevate the least human and denigrate the most. This is the result of the institutionalization of *pleonexia* in the form of *capitalism*. It is an increasingly globalized affliction that must be revealed and understood. When we do so, we will have opened up the space for the possibility of reorganizing our society and economy in such a way that we achieve material satiety in a way that fosters human flourishing, well-being and sustainability.

### Historiography

It is always good practice when trying to understand one’s current condition to explore its roots in the past. That is, “How has this come about?” Answering this we often find missteps along the way, errors in thinking, or perhaps something of value that has been left behind. For western culture this means tracing threads of thought back to the ancient Greeks for therein lays the genesis of much of the foundational thinking in our culture. Thus we find in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy that the Greek philosopher and historian Hesiod first used the word *pleonexia* in *Works and Days* (c. 700 B.C.E.) Civilization was nascent at the time and his was an effort to discover and understand how people could best fully develop their individual capabilities and live with others at the same time. It turns out that Hesiod’s prescription, like many others all throughout history, was the same for both. That *means and ends* are best bound tightly is an often repeated and little heeded, jewel of historical wisdom. Together and apart, *means and ends* must be justified in and of themselves employing the same epistemology.

In *Are You a Capitalist?*, we suggested as a contradistinction, that Capital “stands next to God as a pure being”. It does so because its means and ends are identical: reproduction. Capital’s epistemology is seamless; its understanding of the world is a tautology and it is this synthetic perfection that gives it such power to threaten our planet and us. The question then, is what is the nature of God’s pure being? Or, put secularly, what are humanity’s highest ends and the means most closely associated with them? This is the human quest, *to choose our epistemology*;<sup>2</sup> an effort towards what Plato called “the forms”, what the Christians call *theosis*, what the Buddhists call enlightenment, and so on. Importantly, these ends, and the means towards them, are not places and paths of asceticism, extreme

<sup>1</sup> *What “Psychopath” Means*. Scott O. Lilifeld and Hal Arkowitz; *Scientific American* 11-28-2007, pg. 29

<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-psychopath-means>).

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus makes a compelling case for such a choice in his novel, *The Plague* (1947). Dr Rieux, the fulcrum protagonist, chooses *sympathy* to order, understand and act in the circumstances in which he finds himself. Increasingly the physical sciences are finding themselves in the same position—all of their work requires choices and those choices determine the outcomes of their research. Indeed, any notion of “hard science” is quickly dissipating into the ether of epistemological understandings. Human beings, it turns out, are more like *actors* than objective observers. The epistemology of the Enlightenment, beginning with Descartes, is in the process of being toppled by Object Oriented Ontology.

austerity and denial—such understandings though seemingly ubiquitous, are misunderstandings. Instead, a better understanding is reflected by the saying, *If you love your job you never work a day in your life*—aided by the careful consideration of *love and life*. I hope to show that it is only this quest, one in which means and ends are closely allied, whether secular or theological, that will enable human well-being and sustainability—which, it will turn out, are the same thing. This is *authentic concert*.<sup>3</sup>

For Hesiod, the best man was a virtuous man and a necessary condition of virtue is *justice*. Though he did not define what a just man was, Hesiod made clear that *the unjust man* was one who broke laws (*nomos*) and was “motivated by the desire to have more [*pleon echein*]: more than he has, more than his neighbor has, more than he is entitled to, and, ultimately, all there is to get.”<sup>4</sup> For Hesiod, just laws were a divine gift from Zeus and so once known there is a clear balance implied in Hesiod’s definition which indicates a need for the common good—that is, society’s virtue depends on the virtue of individuals and this depends on individuals able to reach a point of satiety. These virtuous individuals were then best able to “fit” together—“*dike*, the Greek word we have translated as justice, literally means ‘fitting.’”<sup>5</sup>

In our present context today we can easily imagine someone so unsatisfied and unsatisfiable, that they would include in their practice every effort to influence laws in their favor—that is, to write laws that favor themselves, and importantly, mirror their individual imbalance—their in-satiety. And so we can see clearly how unjust laws might be made: for Hesiod, by an unjust man seeking all he can get—and this of course, subverts the divine order, something to which I will return. That this practice has grown exponentially in the recent past is evidenced by the fact that in 1980 there were only a few hundred lobbyists on K Street, the infamous domicile of the petitioners of our government. Today these petitioners number in excess of ten thousand<sup>6</sup> and in fact, as representatives of a privileged class—many if not most of whom likely suffer *pleonexia*—they are the actual authors of many of our laws, thus transforming our elected representatives into mere conduits for the preferences of those who have accumulated sufficient resources. Succinctly, this is called a plutocracy.

So here again we can ask, “How has this come about?” If our early explorations in search of how best to live a civilized life led us to pursue a just society, how did we embrace a trope that enables *pleonexics* to succeed and even be lauded for their acumen and prowess? How is it that Hesiod’s *unjust man* could have become just, or at least, accepted as the norm?

At about the same time that Hesiod was exploring virtue and justice philosophically, Homer was writing *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in which he dealt with similar themes within epic poetry—within stories. This canonical literature gave us what the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy calls a “functional definition” of virtue in which “Justice is understood to be a part of *arête* (*virtue*)...[justice] is the virtue governing social interactions and good citizenship or leadership.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This argument to be developed in the following chapter, *The Lazy Lion on the Savanna*

<sup>4</sup> SEP: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/callicles-thrasymachus/> Accessed February 9, 2012

<sup>5</sup> Randy Honold, PhD Philosophy, DePaul University; personal communication

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/> citing, Center for Responsive Politics; accessed April 11, 2012

<sup>7</sup> SEP <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/callicles-thrasymachus/> Accessed February 9, 2012

Here we see a shift, a tension between Hesiod and Homer. Homer's hero, Odysseus is the paradigm of the "noble warrior" possessed of the skills necessary to accomplish his ends, first to be part of conducting a successful war in Troy and secondly—and importantly for our purposes—to get home to Ithaca, each comprising ten years of numerous trials he must overcome. In Homer, SEP says, we find that virtue "is understood as that set of skills and aptitudes which enable someone to function successfully in his social role," and that..."this functional conception of virtue...can easily come in conflict with Hesiodic ideas about justice."<sup>8</sup> Thus if one's social role requires certain pragmatic acts—bending or breaking rules or laws, for example—then these can be virtuous. SEP goes on to discuss this conflict taken up by Plato some three centuries later in which his character, Meno, challenges Socrates and "claims that a man's virtue consists in the political ability to harm one's enemies and help one's friends, without incurring harm to oneself (SEP, 71e Meno)."<sup>9</sup> Importantly, Meno too has discarded restraint and placed virtue within the context of social roles and the ends to which those roles are directed. This is an apt and fitting description of Odysseus whose central character trait, other than courage, can best be described as "wilyness",<sup>10</sup> an ability to think and act quickly and creatively in the many desperate situations in which he finds himself in order to outwit his enemies and save his crew. Today we call this a hero.

Importantly there is a change in epistemology between Hesiod and Homer. Homer's hero understands the world as a place of contest first, within which virtue is achievable through the winning of contests. Hesiod, on the other hand, sees the world as just and balanced to begin with. While Hesiod's world is not devoid of contest (in fact much of *Works and Days* is written to remonstrate his brother who is competing with him in court for what Hesiod regards as an unfair share of the family estate),<sup>11</sup> he does not begin his understanding of the world with struggle, but instead sees immanent cooperation, upset by excessive competition. It is this immanent cooperation he seeks to restore.

Before I go on here I just want to make a note that ties all this to the present. Teachers and bankers have different social roles, within which there are specific expectations of virtuous and just behavior, these expectations guided by both law and social convention. Of critical importance is that whether by law or by convention, these are assumptions relied on; they are preconceived notions that have no necessary existence, but do have real world consequences. Thus keep in mind why the phrase, "it's not personal, it's just business," might be appropriate in one field but not the other, and whether that is as it should be. It is my goal to show that it must not be if we hope to reach sustainability and lead meaningful lives. We live in a perversely hierarchical world, exactly inverted, both unnatural and bereft of reason regardless. And so our path, our revolution and recovery, will lead us towards inverting the socio-economic status of bankers and teachers.

Just one example from the *Odyssey* should suffice to demonstrate Homer's portrayal of a functional conception of virtue and why it has become so compelling: the well known story of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> An especially apt description in a word, a credit to Paula McQuade, PhD Dept. of English, DePaul University 2010

<sup>11</sup> Apostolos N. Athanassakis, translation, introduction and notes. *Hesiod*; Second Edition; Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 2004

Cyclops. Attracted to the island of the Cyclops by the sound of “bleating goats” and the promise of a wealth of provisions to continue their journey back to Ithaca, Odysseus and his crew are captured and held prisoner by this monstrous one-eyed giant, who at one point begins to eat members of Odysseus’ crew. Under tremendous pressure Odysseus is savvy enough to engage the Cyclops in a casual conversation during which Odysseus discovers the giant has a weakness for wine, especially good wine, stores of which Odysseus fortuitously has on board one of his vessels. Once retrieved Odysseus tricks the Cyclops into getting drunk, and when he passes out, the hero and crew sharpen a mast pole and drive it into the monster’s eye, blinding the giant, leaving him unable to find his next victim. Odysseus however is still unable to escape because the Cyclops keeps a giant boulder across the entrance to his cave which also holds the Cyclops’ goats (The Cyclops lives an otherwise pastoral existence farming and herding goats). Hiding in the cave throughout the night from the now blinded giant, Odysseus and crew wait for morning at which time he knows that both the Cyclops and the goats will go out. In the morning he and his crew cling silently to the underside of rams and manage to slip by the unsuspecting Cyclops, work their way back to their ships and escape to the safety of the sea.

Part of Homer’s message in the *Odyssey* was that courage is necessary but utterly insufficient to survive and prosper in the complex world he is depicting, which is both wartime and the increasingly heterogeneous Greek civilization—that is, the roots of our complex civilization. After all, if Odysseus had simply confronted the Cyclops, he and his crew would have surely been devoured. Homer marks the shift himself moving from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*: Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad* chooses an early death with honor, his most famous phrase, “I hate that man like the very Gates of Death who/...stoops to peddling lies” reflects the ancient conviction.<sup>12</sup> Odysseus then, is the emergent paradigmatic hero who, “will gladly employ deceit to win victory, but if necessary he will confront mortal danger alone and unafraid.”<sup>13</sup> Odysseus combines courage with cunning in the newly evolving world.

In fact it was Odysseus’ cunning that wins the war, infiltrating Troy by disguising himself, “Scarring his own body with mortifying strokes, throwing filthy rags on his back like any slave, he slipped into the enemy’s city, roamed its streets—all disguised, a totally different man, a beggar...”<sup>14</sup> to gain intelligence and then devise the strategy of the now famous Trojan Horse to lead the Greeks to victory. The Trojans, after seeing the Greek fleet depart, believe they are victorious and roll the make-shift sculpture into their gates and begin to get gloriously drunk having been at war so many years. That night Odysseus and his soldiers emerge from the horse and brutally slaughter and sack the unsuspecting city, proving that cunning can overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles to one’s goals. Where thousands tried and failed for many years, the steep walls of Troy fell to a ruse and a few dozen men in one bloodthirsty night. The Greeks then departed Troy not only with Helen, but with many captured women and the riches of the city besides. Here we see in one of western culture’s most iconic heroes the message that practical means toward desired ends can be both just and virtuous even though the means may include deceit. A hero overcomes adversity by doing what needs to be done to achieve an end.

---

<sup>12</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*. (14.182-83) Robert Fagles 1996

<sup>13</sup> Fagles, Introduction to *The Odyssey*, pg. 38. 1996

<sup>14</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*. 4.274-77 Fagles 1996

But! If we step back and take a sort of god's-eye view of Homer's work we may come to a radically different conclusion about Homer's intentions. Perhaps there is another layer. No one will begrudge most of Odysseus' actions (he in fact behaves like a fool in a number of instances, but does learn from his mistakes)—and surely we respect his skill and root for him in this exciting story. But could Homer be raising questions about first choices—these about *ends*? The telling of such powerful tales lures the reader to accept the assumptions which underlie the hero's actions—but are these assumptions lost on the poet?

The *Iliad* tells the story of a then global war between the unified Greek city states throughout the central and western Aegean, and the Spartans defending their homeland in the Eastern Aegean. Why a global war? Because of Helen, a Spartan Queen married to Menelaus, a Greek King, who is seduced by the ravishingly handsome Paris, a Spartan Prince who has come for a visit. Helen falls in love with Paris and while the king is away, they steal a cache of the king's treasure and run off to Troy and get married—a terrific scandal! With some difficulty, the cuckold Menelaus raises an army to attack Troy to get back his beloved Helen (who, it must be said, is Zeus's daughter and likely "the most beautiful woman in the world"). Interestingly, many of the Greek kings wanted to avoid having to fight—even Odysseus pretends to be mentally ill.<sup>15</sup> But once the king secures his fighting force, no cost could be spared; whatever it took to get her back and however long.

It took 10 years!

So think about this...the *Iliad* recounts a ten year war, in which countless men left their homes and families and whatever idyll they would have managed to build for themselves, only to suffer and die, sparked by one man's love for one woman. Unwilling at first, but then they choose. Some say it is the most violent story ever told, even down to this day. Is the *Iliad* a great tale of love, contest and struggle? Yes. Is the *Odyssey* a great tale of courage, and mental and physical ability to battle one's enemies and to overcome adversity? Yes. But it also seems the *Iliad* is a commentary on the futility of war, at a minimum, and likely the hopelessness and unpredictability of love, to which a wiser person might acquiesce. Maybe Homer thinks so: safely back with Menelaus after the war, Helen recalls with some embarrassment the time, "...when all you Achaeans (Greeks) fought at Troy, launching your headlong battles just for *my* sake, shameless whore that I was."<sup>16</sup>(Emphasis original...and if you're not laughing you should read that line again). This is a wonderful passage in which Helen and her husband the king begin to quarrel and grieve about this cataclysmic infidelity and she calms things down by drugging the wine, "heart's-ease, dissolving anger, magic to make us all forget our pains..."(4.245-6) and later confesses that, "I grieved too late for the madness that Aphrodite sent me, luring me there, far from my dear land, forsaking my own child, my bridal bed too, a man who lacked for neither brains nor beauty." (4.294-98)

But it is the *Odyssey*, the Hero's Journey home that gives us solid clues about Homer's thinking. Odysseus is the only member of his entire army to make it back to Ithaca after twenty years of war and struggle—he has effectively lost the entire fighting-age adult male population of his kingdom because of his misguided willingness to participate in this war. And what does he do when he finally reaches his beloved homeland? He employs his now masterful trickery, dons the disguise of a beggar, and "Backed

<sup>15</sup> Stanford History of the Trojan War <http://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history.html> accessed March 15, 2012

<sup>16</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*. 4.160-63 Fagles 1996

by his son and two loyal servants, he kills all one hundred and eight young aristocrats who have besieged his wife [suitors vying for her hand during Odysseus' ten year absence]; his servants savagely mutilate and kill the faithless shepherd Melanthius, who had insulted Odysseus; and Telemachus [his son], ordered to dispatch the disloyal maids with his sword, chooses to deny them this "clean death" (22.488) and hangs them." When the relatives of the suitors rise up against him, Odysseus vanquishes them as well, and it is only through the intervention of the Odysseus' patron goddess Athena that a complete slaughter is averted.<sup>17</sup>

But let me dwell on this scene a little longer, as Homer did, taking great pains to describe the horror of Odysseus' homecoming:

"Odysseus scanned his house to see if any man still skulked alive, still hoped to avoid black death. But he found them one and all in blood and dust...great hauls of them down and out like fish heaped on the sand...twitching, lusting for fresh salt sea but the Sun god hammers down and burns their lives out...so the suitors lay, corpse covering corpse..." (22. 406-414)  
When the "old nurse" comes into the room she finds,

"Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses, splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood, his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—a sight to strike terror." (22. 426-430, emphasis added)

It is at this point that Odysseus orders his son Telemachus to organize the cleaning up of this gruesome scene instructing him to order the maids to clean the, "Chairs and tables—scrub them down with sponges and rinse them clean. And once...the entire house is in order, march the women out of the great hall...and hack them with your swords, slash out all their lives..." (22.463-68), which as mentioned, Telemachus refuses to do—apparently filled with his father's rage, he denies them "this clean death," instead "yanking their necks up, one by one [so that each may watch the other die], so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death..."(22.498-99).

Thus Ithaca, a place we are told throughout the poem was a beautiful, nearly idyllic kingdom—and Odysseus an erstwhile wise and happy king—is now a wasteland of blood. Odysseus is certainly cunning, but he is also revealed as blindly determined and merciless in his pursuits, a hero who can only be restrained by divine intervention. He has been away from home for twenty years, wreaking havoc throughout the Aegean and upon arrival home is so hell bent on some notion of justice—a notion which contradicts Hesiod's balance—that he despoils his kingdom, leaving it doomed to suffer for a generation or more.<sup>18</sup> It is not hard to draw from this the thought that he simply should have never left. (If you like there may be good irony here: Odysseus first pretended to be insane to avoid going to war—he was found by Menelaus' envoys wandering disheveled and seemingly disoriented though a field in Ithaca. Could this be Homer offering us "insanity" as a far more sane state than continuous violence and bedevilment by one's own ill considered beliefs, wants and desires!)

Perhaps the most instructive parts of the *Odyssey* are the places of succor in which Odysseus finds himself on his way home but refuses to understand his good fortune. These are not nearly as exciting as the island of the Cyclops (or the Sirens, or Circe) but are important clues for meaning. One

<sup>17</sup> Fagles, *The Odyssey*, pg. 40 1996

<sup>18</sup> Virtually the entire adult male population of Ithaca had been lost

example is when he is “held captive” by Calypso, the goddess with the “beautiful braids.” By now he has lost his entire fleet and he finds himself alone on the island of the goddess, who offers him everything a man, and a god could want—in fact she offers to make him a god. He shares Calypso’s bed and hasn’t a need for anything in the world. Homer lets us know at length how beautiful this place is:

“...where the nymph with the lovely braids made her home...A great fire blazed on the hearth and the smell of cedar cleanly split and sweetwood burning bright wafted a cloud of fragrance down the island. Deep inside she sang, the goddess Calypso, lifting her breathtaking voice as she glided back and forth before her loom, her golden shuttle weaving. Thick luxuriant woods grew round the cave, alders and black poplars, pungent cypress too, and there birds roosted, folding their long wings, owls and hawks and the spread-beaked ravens of the sea, black skimmers who make their living off the waves. And round the mouth of the cavern trailed a vine laden with clusters, bursting with ripe grapes. Four springs in a row, bubbling clear and cold, running side-by-side, took channels left and right. Soft meadows spreading round were starred with violets, lush with beds of parsley. *Why even a deathless god who came upon that place would gaze in wonder, heart entranced with pleasure.*” (5.63-83, italics added)

But his “love” for his wife and homeland are so great (and he is so focused and driven) that he cannot accept Calypso’s offer, even if it means leaving such an idyllic, heaven-like place, and thus implores his patron goddess Athena to petition Zeus on his behalf to intervene with Calypso to effect his freedom. His plan works. Zeus sends Hermes to talk to Calypso, who is at first furiously angry and rails against the gods, but then acquiesces and ever so sadly lets him go saying, “No need, my unlucky one, to grieve here any longer, no, don’t waste your life away. Now I am willing, heart and soul, to send you off at last.” (5.177-79) But when she offers to help build him a raft, Odysseus’ immediate reaction is anger and distrust, suspecting her of a plot that will lead to his demise—a reaction we might understand as our protagonist seeing himself in others. She finally convinces him of her earnest intentions, “I am all *compassion,*” she says and helps Odysseus build his raft and escape his years-long “captivity.” (5.213 emphasis added)

Most readers recognize in Odysseus his perseverance and dedication to his wife and homeland as virtues. And surely these are worthy values. But Homer has shown us that Odysseus in fact discarded these long ago; he left his wife and beloved kingdom, ultimately for twenty years, to fight a ridiculous war that ended up destroying his kingdom even though he was victorious! If read this way, Homer has preceded the notion of a Pyrrhic victory which occurred some 500 years later in 279 B.C.E.

Another example in which Odysseus finds and discards good fortune is when he winds up among the Phaeacians, importantly his last stop before finally making landfall in Ithaca. In Phaeacia I believe Homer has displayed an alternative vision of what a kingdom could be—a place that Hesiod would pleased to find. A place towards which we should aim.

Leaving Calypso, Odysseus endures yet another perilous sea journey, this time at the hands of Poseidon who, in revenge for Odysseus’ blinding of his son the Cyclops, lets loose a storm which wrecks his fragile craft. Odysseus is washed ashore and found naked, exhausted and near death by the beautiful and admiring princess Nausicaa, daughter of King Alcinous. This kingdom seems utterly unique in the Greek world. The people are professional sailors, yet they are never at war. Their sole purpose in



the world is conveying, transporting people and goods, described in such a way that leaves out payment, as if they are magically rewarded for their benefice and lack of acquisitiveness, and so commerce is not needed. Their feats and games revolve around pure sport. Their wrestling, boxing and athletics seem to have no other purpose—these are not warrior challenges as in the rest of the Greek world—and while losers are losers, the contest is left as just that: a contest, not some lasting badge of honor or dishonor to which punishment and reward flow in turn. Contest is for amusement, it is not their life-blood. Instead, dance and song are held in the very highest esteem.

Odysseus participates in and wins a number of contests, after which he appears to act smugly, gloating about his prowess. In the middle of bragging that he had beaten their best, King Alcinous interrupts to say, “We’re hardly world class boxers or wrestlers, I admit,” and then proceeds to tell Odysseus just what it is they do very well. “We can race like the wind, we’re champion sailors too, and always dear to our hearts, the feast, the lyre and dance and changes of fresh clothes, our warm baths and beds.” (8.280-85) Alcinous neither denigrates Odysseus’ skills nor is he boasting of his own. Instead, we hear in these lines a humble self-satisfaction and contentment that extends to acceptance of Odysseus’ accomplishments even though he is clearly boasting: “...nothing you say among us seems ungracious,” says the king. (8.268).

But notice: the Phaeacians value not only song and dance, but simple things like bathing, clean clothes and *sleeping!* Everything the king mentions is repeatable—something that can be done again and again. Nothing has the finality and *mortality* of a contest. Phaeacia *is* the absolute idyll, an earthly paradise where contentment is not only possible, but actual. It appears to be sustained by a gift economy, both for enabling material welfare, but also one in which self development—excellence in the arts, music, poetry and dance—are individual contributions to the kingdom enriching everyone in turn. Importantly, these activities are truly bountiful because they have no natural limits.

All of their pleasures are *sustainable*. But notice too, that much of what they do requires participation and cooperation—music, dance and song (poetry) require attentive listening and observation, at *minimum*—and to be truly attentive, one must understand what is happening in order to *appreciate* it. And so participation means a deep embeddedness and inclusivity that fosters individual and collective well-being. Participation is critical; it is a ritualized bonding that effectively distributes the resources of the kingdom, holding the community together enabling the flourishing of individuals and the continuity or sustainability of the kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

And the princess has got eyes for Odysseus in a big way. Even better, the king approves and “...he is offered [her] hand in marriage...and a life of ease and enjoyment in a utopian society.”<sup>20</sup> But of course our brave and wily hero declines once again, ostensibly in fidelity to his wife and beloved Ithaca.

---

<sup>19</sup> For a thorough discussion of the critical importance of ritual participation for the maintenance of community, especially in the context of human/nature relations and environmental restoration, see, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion With Nature*. William R. Jordan III 2003

<sup>20</sup> Fagles pg. 35. This “utopian society” is of course what Hesiod was after—and what nearly everyone has sought since time immemorial. Though unachievable, it is the choosing of a direction; it is fundamentally, choosing a way to understand the world, and therefore, how to behave in it. Understanding combined with acts create the world.



Odysseus before Nausikaa. A 1619 painting by Pieter Lastman (Wiki)

Odysseus is his own worst enemy (and many others as well for the havoc he has wreaked). He wouldn't know happiness if it hit him square in the face—contentment seems utterly beyond his understanding and worse, he seems at times, contemptuous of it. Shortly after leaving Troy he has to rescue his crew from the *Land of the Lotus Eaters*, to save them the fate of living forever among those who live in an opiated utopia. Perhaps here Homer has made a useful distinction between a synthetic intoxicated contrivance and an intentional construction of compassionate order founded on virtuous individuals, whose material needs once met, strive for excellence in art, eschewing acquisitiveness, blood contests and conquest. In any case, Odysseus is hell bent on adventure, on wining challenges and contests no matter what the cost (if he even thinks about that), and will never, ever have enough. The same could be said for much of the Greek world, save for the Phaeacians.

This is *pleonexia*—the inability to be sated. As Epicurus said some few hundred years later, “Nothing is enough...to someone for whom enough is little.” (Foster and Clark 126)

I am suggesting this is a layer of meaning and wisdom in Homer's work largely ignored through the ages and is one of countless examples of discarded wisdom that corrupts our lives today. Truly Homer's epic poems are some of the greatest stories in all literature. Anyone who has not read them should consider doing so—there is no need to be intimidated by their length or style of verse. They are “songs” as the poet intended and draw a reader quickly into the singer's world. And Odysseus is a true hero within the story—we are with him all the way (well, until that gruesome ending anyway). The story is so engaging and exciting because Homer shows us a hero who finds trouble and is able to escape by using his own individual wit and courage. Popular culture is replete with examples today; for seafaring, think of the wildly popular Johnny Depp as the pirate protagonist in the hugely successful movie series *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

But if we step back and look at the whole story we may see the futility of Odysseus' first choices; his choices are bound in an understanding of the world and this set him on a path that required *both* courage and wilyness only to escape that very same path to get back to where he started. But this place is no longer the place he left; it is in ruins *because* he left. Be truthful: wilyness is deceit; deceit is lying. Wilyness is *inauthenticity* for a purpose. We *reap what we sow* because *means are ends*. Perhaps here is a comment on the growing complexity of civilization—a place in which many interests intersect and are sure to conflict. Critically: both the definition of conflict and the means of dealing with it are nascent. Getting home to Ithaca, Odysseus “has in fact reached the most dangerous of all his landfalls.

To survive this last trial, he will have to call on all the qualities that mark him as a hero—the courage and martial skill of the warrior he was at Troy, but also the caution, cunning, duplicity and patience that have brought him safe to Ithaca.” (Fagles intro pg. 36) All of that is needed, Homer says, to survive in this nascent world.

Or is it? Doesn't that depend on one's view of the world—when is a conflict genuine and how shall it be resolved? Just who is a hero, and what does a hero do? What might Homer be saying about first choices, about motivations, about contentment and satiety and about the awareness, and lack thereof, of happiness? Regardless of the complexity of civilization, have basic human needs really changed? What if individuals in society sought contentment, well-being and human flourishing, rather than contest, conquest and accumulation of riches...of anything? Would deceit disappear? No. But neither would it be a heroic means.

Here Homer has shown us two epistemologies, ironically in competition: Odysseus lives in a world built on contest, a world in which glory and reputation (*kleos*) is everything—in fact some scholars consider *kleos* to be ancient Greek eschatology. But the Phaeacians live in a world in which human flourishing is real—it is this possibility assumed, *taken for granted*, that enables the Phaeacians to live. King Alcinous recognizes Odysseus' understanding of the world—and appreciates the hero's ability, *in that world*. But it is not the King's world, and knowing the worlds are irreconcilable, he offers to bring Odysseus into his kingdom by marrying his daughter Nausicaa. The king is effectively offering Odysseus redemption and salvation. But Odysseus cannot accept. The illness from which he suffers—insatiety—sends him hurtling towards his next contest and all the world outside of Phaeacia will suffer his pursuits. Maids will be forced to clean up his carnage and then will be hung, one by one.

Stories have a popular cogency and a life unmatched by philosophy. Most have heard of Homer, few of Hesiod. Within these stories lie the threads and lessons of our culture. The threads and lessons most brought to the surface, those seemingly hard wired into our culture, didn't magically appear there—there was no natural process that selected them as superior. These have a history, and when we look at history we should do well to examine who benefits from a story, or the way it is told and retold. Its themes are especially meaningful and useful for some, and not for others.

Surely the Hesiodic concept of Justice is more broadly beneficial than the “functional definition” found in the popular reading of Homer. *History is told by the victorious*, the saying goes. Examine the assumption embedded there—and who benefits from it: the one for whom contest is everything. The *pleonexic*. If anything, the complexity of civilization has enabled the few to manage the many towards their own *pleonexic* ends, to which no virtuous or healthy person would knowingly subscribe. Part of the *means* employed are obfuscation and obstruction of any alternatives—a drawing of the world in black and white, good and evil, *capitalism* or communism. Like capital, the *pleonexic* is single-purposed and develops strategies and tools to not only make and have more in his world, but to make more *of* his world—he must globalize it. Because of his affliction, he must create “economic structures that ease [his] reproductive path... and nothing can be denied access to [his] productive capability and anything can be created in its service.” Thus, since the use value of goods and services are naturally limited, the *pleonexic* builds a culture that pursues “symbolic values thus permitting endless exchange and perpetual

creation and destruction...”<sup>21</sup> The pleonexic is like a rabid lion who devours all the prey on the savanna destabilizing the ecosystem until it collapses...

Homer was no fool. He knew what he was doing—telling an epic story that required the listener to forgive him certain assumptions. Like any artist he painted a picture of what he saw and held it up for all to see—the interpretation that survived has clearly benefited some more than others.

Some three hundred years later Plato will explore how justice and practical reasoning are related by juxtaposing cooperative behavior with that of the self interested pleonexic. “[T]he whole argument of the *Republic* amounts to a proof that [a functional conception of virtue] can be reconciled with the demands of Hesiodic justice, if only we understand rightly what successful human functioning consists in.” And this Socrates says is a “justice, as the virtue of the soul..., is what enables the soul to perform its functions well, so that a just person lives well and happily.” (SEP Justice). *Pleonexia* makes happiness impossible; each are *mutually destructive*. Where there is no satiety there is no happiness; where there is happiness, there is no *pleonexia*. Those who suffer *pleonexia* prevent the happiness and well-being of the many as they draw and conscript us into the world of their creation. They cannot help themselves—it is the nature and essence of the disease to create such a world; a world where capital has an ontological status; a world where capital is a god. It is a world that adds *ism* to *capital* to complete the institutionalization of their affliction. It is the establishment of a secular religion founded on an amoral ontological being with pleonexics as its priesthood and expert class.

So, look around you today and notice the supposed successful heroes of our culture. Think about Donald Trump and Steve Jobs and even Bill Gates, praised for his philanthropy. Do these entrepreneurs know the peace of satiety; or do they continue to “achieve” even though they are literally swimming in wealth and power? Think about the CEO of any major corporation. Each of these is like Odysseus—they are courageous and adept at meeting and overcoming challenges. And like Odysseus, they cannot stop; stewards of capital are held prisoner by its attribute, the imperative to grow. And so we can even say the best CEO’s suffer most from *pleonexia*, as he or she is most kin to capital and the affliction drives ability. These have chosen the epistemology of capital—to see the world as capital sees the world.

Ask yourself why they do what they do. And then deeply consider if they have added value to human life or if they have inhibited us from becoming more human. Managing multi-billion dollar transnational companies depends on extracting and procuring the cheapest possible resources from around the globe—and competing against others doing the same—treating as many costs as possible as externalities. In common language, the *means* towards their endless growth includes passing off costs and responsibility on others, whether individuals, societies or governments. And more: their ends of efficient production requires driving down the price of labor, fragmentizing tasks into previously unrecognizable work which transforms human beings into smoothly functioning cogs within a schematic drawing whose relationship to the designer and even each other is then contentious—workers become *things* to be managed.<sup>22</sup> Think of Apple in China. Why does a company consider the happiness of its

---

<sup>21</sup> EJW, *Are You a Capitalist?*

<sup>22</sup> “Management” very often *means* placing workers in competition with each other. For a cogent discussion of this *means* employed by capitalism see *The Essence of Neoliberalism*, by Pierre Bourdieu in

workers wholly subordinate to the happiness of its stockholders? Why is the *telos* of human beings subordinate to the *telos* of endless growth, subordinate to the *telos* of capital? Examining our assumptions is difficult but necessary work.

Perhaps most importantly, these *heroes* cannot stop what they are doing—like Odysseus they lead lives without satisfaction and create a world without satisfaction. Their best work includes manipulating advantage, in courts and legislatures, in the media and at all levels of government, where much cunning deceit is employed to redefine their *advantage* as *good policy*; *pleonexia* as *virtue*. Does the work of these celebrated people bring us closer to Phaecia? Or has their illness forced us to dwell on the island of the Cyclops, in danger of being devoured and as given to cannibalism as the beast we struggle to avoid?

For clarity, think now of the Wall Street banker and the teacher to make the contrast vivid. The banker is the caretaker of disembodied capital—the very “best” as close to pure *pleonexia* as we can get. The teacher is the caretaker of beating hearts fed by deep-breathing lungs which then fuel curious minds whose *telos* is happiness and well-being. Perhaps their *telos* extends to service for others—perhaps they want to be teachers (I will argue later that this is in fact natural). Which is the real hero? Where there is *pleonexia*, there is no happiness—these are *mutually destructive*, their means and ends are irreconcilable.

Why do we elevate the insatiable, the powerfully acquisitive, and denigrate the pastors of our next generation? Why would any clear thinking human being choose the epistemology of capital? Our social construct must be exactly inverted. Why? Because we won't survive the *pleonexic* assault on the global savanna or lead meaningful lives in well-being until we tell ourselves a better story. Sustainability is tied tightly to happiness. Happiness and well-being is the story of Phaecians who find satiety and contentment in the limited, and joy in the limitless.

---

LeMonde diplomatique December 1998. <http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu> We can this of this microcosm within the system as a fractal property of the system—ironically not of nature, or what exists, but of a synthetic construct, a product of the pleonexic imagination.

## Bibliography

Apostolos N. Athanassakis, translation, introduction and notes. *Hesiod*; Second Edition; Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 2004

Bourdieu, Pierre *The Essence of Neoliberalis*; Le Monde diplomatique December 1998

[://mondediplo.com/1998/12/](http://mondediplo.com/1998/12/)

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*; Translated by Stuart Gilbert, Vintage International, New York 1948

EJW, *Are You a Capitalist?* tecumsehproject.org

Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles; Penguin Books, New York 1996

Jordan III, William R. *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion With Nature*. University of California Press 2003

Lilifeld , Scott O. and Arkowitz, Hal. *What "Psychopath" Means*; *Scientific American* 11-28-2007, pg. 29

Open Secrets.org: [://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/](http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/)

Stanford History of the Trojan War [://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history](http://www.stanford.edu/~plomio/history). accessed March 15, 2012

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University: [://plato.stanford.edu/entries/callicles-thrasymachus/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/callicles-thrasymachus/)

©Copyright EJW 2012 EJ Weinstangel